

The

Bull Fth' Thorn

By

PAUL CUSHING.



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THE BULL I' TH' THORN

THE BULL I' TH' THORN

A ROMANCE

BY

PAUL CUSHING

AUTHOR OF 'THE BLACKSMITH OF VOE,' ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

MDCCCXC

BEING SURE OF ONE "DEAR READER"

AND DELIGHTFULLY FRANK CRITIC,

Æ inscribe

THE BULL I' TH' THORN,

TO HIM—MY SON.

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PART I.

THE BULL I' TH' THORN.



CHAPTER I.

THE BULL I' TH' THORN.

IN the year 1810, when George III. was king, though the Regency was looming big, and the English were slowly but surely teaching the rest of Europe that they were something more than *une nation boutiquière*, on the edge of Redstag moor there stood a rambling old house, black and green in colour, and of aspect gaunt and gloomy. It had a great many chimneys, a very few windows, and a good thick roof of thatch.

Of the chimneys, however, only one had been known for many years to emit smoke ; the others had long ceased to remember that they were not originally built for birds to nest in. One-half the windows were boarded up, and others held nothing but an empty iron frame. The thatch was black with age, and its top was shaggy with patches of long grass ; there were clumps of moss there, or something that looked like moss, and under one of the chimneys grew a wild rose-bush.

In front of the house, which looked down the road and across the moor, was a large courtyard paved with cobble-stones, which had taken to growing grass and had come to look curiously like a bit of stony pasture. About the courtyard were huge piles of buildings which had once been stables, cow-sheds, barns, coach-houses, and wain-sheds ; now, all was ruin and desolation. There

were ugly gaps in the roofs, and some of the walls had crumbled, while many of the doors had vanished, and of those that remained, the greater part hung helpless on one hinge, or banged to and fro on a gusty night for want of a fastener.

The former character of the house was briefly and significantly indicated by a couple of odd relics that met the glance of every passer-by. One of these was a mouldy wooden jib with two iron hooks in it, which was fastened to the side of the house overlooking the road; the other was a long low drinking-trough that stood nearer the road. The marks of horses' teeth were still visible on the roadward side, but the trough itself was now dry, and half full of soil and weeds, and the sides had covered themselves with minute parasitic growths full of destructiveness and of beauty. Jib and trough were unmistakeable tokens of the decayed inn

which, to judge from the range of dilapidated out-buildings, had once upon a time aspired to the dignity of a coaching-house.

It is well known that all properly constituted persons find something pleasant in the misfortunes of their friends, and upon the same rich side of our nature we discover a soft melancholy pleasure in tracing the causes of decay of fortune in persons and in things. How the "Bull i' th' Thorn," as the house was called, came to decay, was not far to seek; one had only to open his eyes and look at the road to see so much. In a word, it was want of traffic. The broad level road, over which had travelled coaches, and chaises, and buggies, and huge tented caravans drawn by eight horses, and ponderous farm-waggon, and rumbling yellow-bodied carriages hung low on leather straps, was now little else than a wide strip of grass between the heather and the furze.

Two miles farther on along the moor, the question, What had become of the traffic? was satisfactorily answered; there the road had taken a new curve, which avoided the precipitous descent just below the "Bull i' th' Thorn," which led into the rock-shadowed village of Poloc. With the new road, which left the moor and came along the valley at an easy gradient into Poloc, went the traffic, all in a flash, and left the old posting-house desolate and stranded.

Its decay had been slow and gradual, up to a certain point; thenceforward, it had seemed to suddenly make up its mind that the tide was gone for good, and would never come back in any shape or form, and it was useless to battle any longer with adversity. A sign was this sad conclusion that the originally fine constitution of the "Bull i' th' Thorn" was broken down, and its health fatally impaired. Had it laid violent hands upon

itself and gone down in a great sheet of flame, no one would have been surprised, and some sentimentalists would have been glad. But instead of that, it became simply demoralised, lost all sense of self-respect and even of personal decency, until its windows became eyesores, and for want of paint and doors and bolts, with its rents and tears and rusty doorless hinges pointing impudently in one's face, it became nothing better than a common footpad, all rags and tatters, dirt and villany. Many a long year had it looked out over the dark far-reaching moor for the return of the golden thread of traffic, until at last the wild dark savagery of the moor, without any of its beauty, had crept into the heart and face of the gaunt and lonely house, and given to it an expression bordering upon wickedness.

It was early in November, and the day was dull and cold, for the sky was covered

with heavy grey cloud spotted here and there with blackness, and a keen raw wind came moaning and howling across the moor, as if it meant to make the "Bull i' th' Thorn" its lair for the night. Down in Poloc, walled with rocks and roofed with trees, the wind on the moorland above sounded now like the beating surf on a lee-shore, and then like a human cry of rage and anguish; but it was felt only among the tops of the tallest trees; for so sheer was the descent from the moor to the village, that, within a few hundred yards of the decayed inn, the ravening blast suddenly found itself careering no longer across the quivering face of earth, but launched full-tilt against the open sky. In this predicament, it usually lost no time either in harking back to the moor, or in making for the uplands across the valley, whose bleak sides it tried in vain to torture.

Mounted on a stout white cob, and enveloped in a great drab overcoat that reached within a couple of inches of his spurs, with collar turned up about his ears, and his hat pulled down on to his nose, was Squire Crump of Poloc Hall. He was a heavy man physically and mentally; and so when the cob saw that his own business and his master's pleasure were about to take them on to the moor, he gave one glance at the steep road between the rocks, snorted defiance, and went at it with a jumping gallop. Near the top, the flanking rocks ended, and with a curve the road debouched on the moor.

No sooner was the Squire's head on a line with the moor, than the playful wind, which had been lurking round this favourite spot with an eye to humour, sprang right at him with the cheerful cry of a wolf, smote him hard in the face and bore him back-

wards, so that he had to seize the cob's mane to save himself from falling. Meanwhile, his hat went spinning down the hill, until it found a resting-place between two stones.

"The devil take the thing! I never come nigh the place but what I have some ill-luck. I'll go back," muttered the Squire, in the teeth of the wind.

He turned his animal's head and went back. Now that his hat was gone, one could get a fair view of his face. It was fat and red and sleek and hairless. His eyes looked small and sharp, and his mouth large and firm, so firm that an enemy would have called it cruel. The general expression of his countenance was a subtile blending of self-complacency, audacity, and pride; pride of the baser sort, which ran to scornfulness and contempt. On the whole and so far as his face went, he was a man who looked his best when his eyes were hidden under

his hat, and his mouth and chin were buried in his coat-collar; for he had unquestionably a good nose.

When he reached the place where his hat lay, said the Squire to his animal, "Come, Noddy, you don't expect me to get down for that, I hope? Pick it up, you scamp."

Whereupon the cob did as he was bidden, and the Squire reached over and took it out of his mouth, and put it on his head. The cob, a sagacious animal who would do almost anything that his master told him, except sing, and in return expected to be always told what he had to do, now stood stock-still; for his head being turned towards a solid wall of rock, which was too strong for him to push down and too high for him to leap, he must needs consider this a kind of order not to advance. For a full minute the Squire sat tapping his boot with his riding-whip, evidently in a brown-study.

“Nay, I’ll go on with it. Perhaps they will come to terms now. Blue blood, I think! Much it’s worth with a dirty skin, an empty belly, and a bare back!”

He spoke out, for there was none to hear him that he knew of, except Noddy, and Noddy was in his confidence. Then he touched the bridle, and in next to no time Noddy carried him into the courtyard of the “Bull i’ th’ Thorn.” The Squire knocked loudly upon one of the stone pillars of the portico, but no one answered. So he rode Noddy up the short flight of low broad steps that gave on to the portico, and along the great flat stones, too well laid for the tiniest seedling to find a bed between the crevices, as far as the ponderous oaken door. Then he seized the knocker, and sent Echo scuttering through the empty rooms and along the dim passages. A movement was audible within, and soon a heavy step was

heard at what seemed a great distance, traversing a long passage-way; it drew nearer and nearer to the door, and then a woman's strident voice called out—

“Confound you, for a piece of impudent baggage, whoever ye be! Couldn't ye make your way to the other door? Are ye a lord, that I must unbar and unbolt the great door to admit your Highness? Who be ye, and what d'ye want here?”

A smile of contemptuous amusement crossed the face of the Squire, but his tones were exceedingly polite as he answered back—

“Oh, Lady Poloc, is that you? I beg your forgiveness; I did not know you kept the front door barricaded. Don't trouble to open it; I will go to the lower door. It is only Jonathan Crump of Poloc Hall, your humble servant.”

There was open mockery, not in the voice,

but in the smile and bow with which the Squire accompanied his last remark.

“Save the mark! but I thought it was one of those gipsy rogues, Squire. Wait a moment, sir, and—there, it’s soon open.”

It was the same voice, strident; but, being the organ of a different sentiment, the change was almost startling. As she spoke, the door flew back with a creak. And the woman, suddenly finding herself face to face with a white horse, like the door, fell back with a creak.

“Oh, oh, Lord a’ mercy!” she cried, retreating with upraised hands, as Noddy, ever obedient to lightest touch, advanced a couple of steps and thrust his head and neck in at the door.

With a laugh, the Squire called out, “Don’t be frightened; we are not coming in. Is Sir Ralph at home?”

“He’s at home, be sure, Squire; he is

never anywhere else. He's not been out of sight of the house for over a year, as I know of," answered the woman, coming forward and stroking Noddy's nose.

"Will you tell him, please, that I, Squire Crump of Poloc Hall, wish to see him for a few minutes on a matter that concerns him?"

"Oh yes, I'll tell him—I'll tell him just that," replied the woman, with a peculiar smile upon her face as she turned away and clattered down the long empty corridor, whose walls were green and grey with mildew.

"Noddy," said the Squire, patting the animal's neck, as the woman's footsteps died away in the distance, "you managed to frighten her ladyship a bit, though she doesn't look like one who would be easily put out. A regular virago to look at, with her bare arms, and turned-up frock, and

big black eyes, and a face like—— She has been a handsome woman in her time, though. And don't you forget, Noddy, that she is still My Lady Poloc, and no doubt thinks very small-beer of your poor master and mistress. Never mind, Noddy. We've got the money and the land and—— Ah, I hear her dainty footfall. No wonder the place is tumble-down. She shakes the ground she treads on."

Soon the woman stood in front of horse and rider and said, with folded arms, "I gave him your words, Squire, your very words."

"Well, what did he say?"

"Nay, it's not for me to give you his answer. You wouldn't wish it, Squire?" said the woman in a deprecatory tone, dropping her hands to her petticoat and making a humble curtsy.

"And why not? My good wom——lady,

don't be absurd! Let me have his answer, please," cried the Squire, a little lofty in tone; for though the curtsy—the first he had ever received from the same quarter—was exceedingly gratifying, and seemed to set the seal to his authority and mastery, he was nevertheless a bit nettled at the woman's manner.

She still hesitated, and the Squire, tapping his boot impatiently with his whip, sang out, "If you are afraid to speak, I——"

"It's not me that's afraid to speak. I gave my man your words; and when he had stroked his white beard half a minute or so, he looked up and said, 'My compliments, and tell Squire Crump of Poloc Hall that I desire him to continue, only at a quicker rate, his journey to the devil, and not ever again to halt on his way at the "Bull i' th' Thorn"!'"

Up went the woman's head, snap went her jaws, and her black eyes flashed a wicked defiance; firm on her feet, and with folded arms, she stood, and her face seemed transfigured, beautified, and even ennobled with the strength of her full dark passion.

For some moments, the Squire stared at the woman in utter amazement, with open eyes and parted lips. Then his red face waxed brilliant with anger; twice he seemed on the point of exploding in speech, but he set his jaws firmly together, and held in his wrath by force of will. Slowly the fiery splendour of his moon face died away, his natural ruddiness returned, and with it came a bitter mocking smile.

“Sir Ralph hath a merry wit, my lady, and it brightens with adversity. Were he here, I would remind him that it is churlish if travellers along the same road will not jog on in company; the more so, when

the one is familiar with the road, and the other is not. Still, if Sir Ralph desires not my company *homewards*, I must even jog on in his wake alone. I doubt not, my lady, this merry wit has been a mark of the Polocs time out of mind?"

"I never heard that they lacked wit to know a rogue when they saw him," retorted her ladyship, still trim for action.

"Yet of all their brilliant possessions this alone abideth with them, unless we count in the 'Bull i' th' Thorn.' Sad, very sad! Still, as I often say, my lady, what matters it if the pocket is empty, so long as the blood is blue? Talking about the 'Bull i' th' Thorn' reminds me. I have got a nice little cottage, snug and pretty and clean, that would just suit you. It isn't in Poloc parish, to be sure, being a couple of hundred yards beyond the boundary; but, heaven bless me! what is

there so sacred in Poloc soil, that you cling to it after it has ceased to cling to you?" exclaimed the Squire, who had laid the foundations of his fortune along the lines of stearin, palmitin, and olein, and was innocent of any sentimental attachment to any less greasy substance.

The woman gave a knowing laugh, and answered, "By the same token, what is there about the 'Bull i' th' Thorn' and its poor five acres of wretched moorland that barely pays for working, that Squire Crump of Poloc Hall should be so eager to buy it?"

"My good woman, what——"

"My good woman, eh? Don't you 'good woman' me, my good man! To the likes of you, I'm Lady Poloc, wife to Sir Ralph Poloc, Baronet, sixth in succession, please your worship!" cried her ladyship, with a voice of brass.

"I beg a thousand pardons," said the Squire, lifting his hat, with an awkward attempt at ironical gallantry. "It was a mere slip of the tongue. In my most private thoughts—yea, even in my dreams—I think of you as Lady Poloc. You ask me why I desire to get you out of this old, gloomy, wind-swept, ghost-haunted, tumble-down, ramshackle cavern of a house? Need you ask, Lady Poloc?"

"'Tis a needless question, in sooth, when I know there's small chance of getting the true answer from you, Squire."

"Really, if I were not an amiable man, you would make me cross, Lady Poloc. Doesn't it stand to reason that I should have an interest in your welfare and comfort?"

"Happen it stands to reason, like many another thing that doesn't come to pass. Be that as it may, my name isn't Selina Poloc if it stands to your nature, Squire.

Welfare and comfort—fiddlesticks! Rafe might believe it, because he's gone soft, but not me. What you can't abide is, that there should be a house or a foot of land in the parish that doesn't belong to you, and does belong to them as owned, for many a long year, all that you own, and a precious sight more. You want to grab the last stick and stone of the Polocs', and drive the last of them out of the place. Well, you won't do it, not while the breath is in my body; and that's plain English for you, I hope."

"Quite so. What you call your plain English is, I suppose, a mark of your ancient descent, your pure breed, if not your good-breeding. Plain English, pure blood, and—and the 'Bull i' th' Thorn,'—how things do hang together in this world! An obscure origin, tallow-dips for a crest, and Poloc Hall for a home—how things do hang together in this world!

I am sorry you won't listen to reason, but I can wait. How is young Mr Ralph getting along?"

"Neither better nor worse than usual, that I know of," answered the woman, brusquely enough, though with a perceptible softening of her aggressive manner.

The sharp grey eyes of the Squire seemed to retreat into their sockets, whence they peered out through a circle of rosy fat, as he said—

"I am told that he is pretty handy with horses. My groom is leaving me in a week or two; and if Mr Ralph would like the job, I'm willing to take him on. What do you think about it?" His tone was very mild, but his eyes twinkled curiously.

"I doubt if he would look at it. He's so proud and stubborn like, more's the pity. But I'll tell him of it, and he can please himself."

CHAPTER II.

MAGNI STAT NOMINIS UMBRA !

THE Polocs had a standing quarrel with History. They charged that high and mighty dame with defrauding them of a certain modicum of honour, by neglecting to record their name in the roll of Battle Abbey. Never would they lower their high contention that Ralph de Poloc was one of the companions of the Conqueror; and though it recks them little at this time o' day, it is interesting to observe that at the foot of the roll that has been placed in the church of Dives in Normandy, in a kind of supplement to it, there occurs the

name of Ralph de Poloc. Which would seem to indicate that, though he was not of those who fought at Hastings, the said Ralph was originally cast for the expedition of the Bastard, but failed to turn up at the right time and so got left. Possibly his stem-winder was a little late, or he had forgotten to sign the pledge, or he fell into the hands of thieves, or what was more likely, into the arms of Herletta's daughter. And there is every reason to suppose, indeed there is historical evidence to show, that when he came to himself Ralph de Poloc lost no time in heading his own expedition to England.

It is not recorded what were the exact words which Duke William addressed to his tardy yeoman when he showed himself at Court, but they were to this effect: "Sirrah, thou art too late for the shaking of the tree; why, then, dost thou think thyself in time for the gathering up

of the fruit? Yet, seeing that where thou sittest down, there thou takest root, get thee into the middle of the land, where are great forests and wide moors and rocks as grim as thy own countenance; carve thee out a good wide seat—and sit—and take root. And may thy branches be green until—until England be conquered a second time!”

It would appear that the man who was too late for the battle of Hastings, was yet in time and perfectly willing to follow the advice of his great chief. For when, *temp.* Edward I., certain royal commissioners, who were going about the country engaged in the thankless task of questioning titles to estates, arrived at Poloc, they found a stately hall, in the midst of a mighty chace full of big game. Required to show his titles, Ralph de Poloc, a tall man with soft blue eyes, and a great golden beard that fell so low as his belt, stood forth, and, leaning on

a rusty battle-axe, thus addressed the royal commissioners: "My lords, the words of William the Conqueror to my ancestor were these,—Get thee into the middle of the land, and carve thee out a good wide seat, and sit, and take root, and may thy branches be green until England is conquered a second time. And that have we done, by the aid of the Blessed Saints. Our seat extends twelve miles to the west and twelve miles to the east, four to the north and two to the south; and within those boundaries, there is no man who will question our authority. My title to that is here!"—tapping his ponderous battle-axe. "With this axe my forebears carved out their seat, and with this axe will I defend it." Whereupon the commissioners, struck with the brave stomach of a mere commoner, turned their horses' heads and rode back by the way they came.

The Polocs took kindly to heiresses, and scarcely a generation went by without some fair lady bringing broad acres into the family. Their alliances brought them into connection with the Cotams, Bigots, Scropes, Aitons, Bulmers, Dawnyses, Eures, Nevills, Babingtons, Fulnetbys, and many another name of good repute. They had estates in Northamptonshire, Warwickshire, Lancashire, and Yorkshire, and their power and glory were great, as their quarterings were many and brilliant. They were not a showy race, nor ambitious, nor adventurous; they led mostly quiet lives, nurtured their strength closely, and, taking small risks, were content with like gains. As their personal achievements, with a few exceptions, were commonplace, their honours were without distinction. They had no lack of wit, and opportunities in abundance; but they neither possessed nor coveted the fierce ambition, the tower-

ing pride, the restless energy whereby men mount aloft, knock their heads against the stars, and fall gloriously. In historical importance, therefore, the Polocs are not to be mentioned in the same breath with the Nevills, the Howards, the Bohuns, the Plantagenets, the Percys, the Talbots, the Courtenays, and the Beauchamps. They were not great soldiers or sailors, or statesmen or churchmen. But they furnished Gentlemen of the King's Bedchamber, Sheriffs of the County, Members of Parliament, Royal Commissioners, Escheators of Counties, Governors of castles, Justices of the Peace, and some few Judges.

A Poloc went to Virginia and never came back again; another Poloc wrote a History of the Poloc Family that was capital reading; while a third Poloc was known to have written a couple of plays that were never acted, and a drinking-song that became a

popular favourite. Needless to say, these daring spirits were all younger sons. As before observed, the Polocs were not a fighting family. When nunneries and monasteries were in the market, and Church lands were to be had for a song by those who knew how to sing, or when forfeited Irish estates were falling like ripe fruit into the lap of the lucky—on such occasions the Polocs were well in front, and fought the game like heroes. Their military record, however, was scant. Still, on the other hand, at what time they did buckle on their sword, they acquitted themselves like men who had come of a race of warriors, rather than of a stock of peaceful country squires. Bowing but seldom at the shrine of Bellona, that strong-hearted goddess, as if to seduce them from the inglorious habitude of peace, marked their coming with signal favour. Thus the going forth of a Poloc to battle

was ever, in the event, a red-letter day in the family annals; and this, not from the quantity of blood he lost or caused others to lose, but from the glory he gathered.

Thus, on the bright morning of August 27, 1346, the day following the evening that glowed with the star of Crecy, the great Edward III. was on the battle-field, with the Black Prince by his side, and surrounded by his nobles, his valiant soldiers, and his dead enemies to the number of thirty-five thousand, including kings, princes, bannerets, knights, gentlemen, men-at-arms, and the common rank and file. Flags fluttered in the breeze, armours flashed in the sunshine, there was a blare of bugles *clamorque virûm*. Kneeling in front of the king is one Ralph de Poloc, who looks guilty in a guilty attitude. Suddenly, however, there is a mighty clangour of trumpets, and the guilty-looking man is proclaimed "Sir Ralph de Poloc, Knight

Banneret." The king takes him by the hand, and as he rises to his feet looking like a pardoned criminal, says to him, "Sir Ralph, 'tis not given to every man to save the life of his king's son. Thou hast well earned thy knighthood."

Then the chief herald advances and delivers to the banneret his letters-patent from the king, dated the "Field of Crecy," reciting his deed of prowess, that all the world might know how, in a moment of peril, when by some chance the young Prince of Wales found himself alone and surrounded by a group of French enemies, the said Ralph de Poloc came with a great shout and a strong hand to the rescue of his prince, clave the skulls of five Gallic warriors ere they had time to duck them, smote a sixth in the mouth so that he swallowed a handful of teeth and died thereof in great agony, and leaping at a seventh, like a wild cat, caught him by the

throat and throttled him. Thus was the young prince delivered from the hands of his enemies; and for the same service and to "support his dignity," his sovereign gave him "a grant of rents in the county of Lancaster, value five hundred marks a-year." A very seductive goddess is Bellona, in some of her moods.

The contest between the houses of York and Lancaster being a mere struggle for power, made demands less upon the patriotism than the self-interest of the subject. A reflection, this, which the Polocs apparently made for themselves, seeing that they did a little fighting both for the Red Rose and the White. It was the great Opportunist period of English history, when *der kluge Mann* kept his weather-eye open, and trimmed and tacked on the scientific principle of noting which way the wind blew, and on which side his bread was buttered. Henry VI. made Ralph

de Poloc sheriff of his home county of Derby, escheator of the counties of Derby and Stafford, and granted him the manor of Atleswick in Yorkshire. The son of the escheator, upon the death of his Lancastrian sire, thought it prudent to tack, seeing that Henry was in prison with every prospect of remaining there. So he became a Yorkist, wore the White Rose, was knighted by Edward IV., and made governor of the castle at Northampton, and afterwards at Lancaster.

The battle of Flodden was a serious mistake—from the Poloc standpoint. For on that bloody field the son of the governor fell to rise no more, while Bellona smiled grimly. It was the only Poloc that ever fell in battle, during seven hundred years of family history. He died bravely, of course; but if he had stayed at home and married his only son to the great heiress, Julia, only child of Sir

Netherby Cotam, there would have been something done worth doing. As it was, his death brought a little honour to the family, and lost a splendid *dot*: there could be no doubt the battle of Flodden was a serious mistake.

On the breaking out of the Civil War, the Polocs sided with their king; there was no trimming and tacking in this *Sturm und Drang*. They went into it like the loyal gentlemen they were, and though the luck went against them pretty heavily, they had a good conscience to keep them warm against the cold blast of adversity which smote them. When the dogs of war were first let loose, Ralph de Poloc was the first to execute the king's commission of array in his own county. He served as a colonel of dragoons, and brought himself into such honourable fame for his prowess and fidelity that the Parliamentarians did him the signal honour

of excepting him by name from availing himself of the privileges of the Treaty of Uxbridge.

The bloody drama opened on Sunday afternoon, October 23, 1642, and on that hard-fought field at Edgehill, Ralph de Poloc, with his long white beard, made himself a name. Thrice were his dragoons overpowered by the enemy and driven back broken, only to rally again and charge with redoubled fury, led by their bareheaded colonel, who waved his sword and cried aloud, "Forward, my boys! Have at them again! For God and the king!" And with an answering shout, the troopers went at it again and again until the enemy broke and fled. But whether retiring or pursuing, the white-bearded colonel never once lost sight of the king's person. While the fiery Rupert was hunting the flying squadrons of the enemy from the field, the

main body of the royal forces was sorely pressed by the foot and horse of Essex; the royal standard was taken and the standard-bearer slain. The king himself had a narrow escape of being captured. At a critical moment he was left almost alone, and the enemy close upon him. With half-a-dozen of his men, the colonel threw himself between the king and the enemy, and engaged in a fierce and most dramatic hand-to-hand contest. Gradually there gathered round the king a small band mainly of noblemen and gentlemen, and the person of his Majesty was safe. For this act of bravery, the king knighted the gallant colonel on the field. He was afterwards taken prisoner and confined for several years in London by the Committee of the Commons; his life was in danger for some time, but eventually he was discharged on the payment of a large sum of money.

Oddly enough, so far as can be gathered from the family records, the Polocs were concerned only with the beginning and the end of the Civil War: the colonel was at Edgehill, and his son and successor was at the "crowning mercy" of Worcester. Between the two events, the military record of the Polocs is a curious blank. After Worcester, Ralph de Poloc went into hiding; all his estates were confiscated, and his property at once seized upon. While in concealment, he came one day in a wood across three country men, one of whom was dressed in a pair of common grey cloth breeches, a leathern doublet, and a green jerkin. Their glances met, and, with a start, Poloc fell upon his knee exclaiming, "My God! Sire, is it possible?" *It was the king.* In making his way to the coast, Poloc was surprised by some troopers and made prisoner. He lay in prison for some months,

and was then sent, in company with some Scotch prisoners, to New England, where he was sold into servitude for five years. Not a pleasant fate for an English gentleman this ; but the Rev. John Cotton, minister at Boston then, in a letter to Cromwell, thought it was kindly usage. Ralph de Poloc thought otherwise—though his master, Mr Isaac Allerton, was a godly Puritan with a twang, and a deacon to boot.

At this time, when church membership was a condition of citizenship, and to be outside the Church was to suffer the loss of all political rights ; when people commonly addressed each other as “brother” and “sister,” odd as it appears, the class distinctions of the *madre patria* were in existence in the heart of the New England commonwealth. No mechanic, farmer, or labourer could be a “gentleman” ; he was only “Goodman” So - and - so. To be a

gentleman was to be exempt from the punishment of whipping.

Mr Isaac Allerton, though he was born the son of an innkeeper within sound of Bow Bells, was a colonial "gentleman." He was tall, with a severe cast of countenance, and only one eye, which he always kept open to the main chance. He dressed in drab from head to heel, and wore a belted doublet, short breeches, woollen stockings, low shoes, a broad-brimmed hat with a low crown, a wide ruff, gauntlet gloves, a cloak that reached to his knees, and a sword at his side. He was a man of substance, dignity, piety, and honour; he was not only a deacon, but also a councillor of the General Court, held large grants of land, and was the best boat-builder in Boston.

This gentleman treated the unfortunate Ralph de Poloc cavalierly, which here means puritanically, dictionaries notwithstanding.

In the direction of Charlestown, he owned some rough timber-land which he wished cleared; so he set his bond-servant to burning brushwood, picking up stones, felling trees, grubbing up roots, fencing, draining, and suchlike work of a light and easy nature, in which there was no element of degradation, and nothing that was uncongenial to a man like Poloc.

His companions in labour were also men of his breed: men who had sat in the bilboes and the stocks, and had stood bravely in the pillory for minor offences; there were several slit-eared gentry in the gang, while one man had sewed on his coat two large letters, D. A., whereof the interpretation was, Drunkard and Adulterer; and another unfortunate, having been convicted of theft, had wellnigh lost his wits with chagrin, because he had been solemnly condemned thenceforward to be called plain Silas, instead

of Mr Silas Wigglesworth as formerly. This man evidently was hardly used.

After ten months of this kind of life, Poloc was transferred to the shipbuilding yard, and set to work upon shallops, ketches, lighters, and pinnaces, intended for fishery and coast trade. He saw a ship of two hundred and fifty tons burden launched, rigged, freighted, and sent forth with solemn prayers to far-off Spain. By the time Poloc had got his hand into trim as a shipwright, he had had enough of New England to last him all his life, and he determined if possible to escape. He laid his plans accordingly, and succeeded in getting away in a small open boat one dark night in February, with provisions enough to last him a couple of days. He had intended to make for Monhegan Island, then a great resort for fishing-ships from West of England and Channel ports ; but as the wind was contrary, he hoisted a sprit-

sail and shaped a course for Cape Cod. His navigation was of an empirical character, and the next morning he found himself at sea in both senses of the phrase, out of sight of land, and sailing, like Columbus, by the chart of faith and the compass of hope. Nevertheless, by the good providence that ever tendeth the infant in years or in knowledge, on the fifth day he found himself and his craft both alive in Nantucket Sound, wherein he was picked up by a fishing-shallop belonging to Rhode Island, where he was landed.

Rhode Island, like Maine, was excluded from the confederacy of the various settlements, which had taken the name of the "United Colonies of New England." For one thing, Rhode Island was largely settled by exiles and refugees who had been driven out from the United Colonies as heretics, together with others who had found the

strict rule of the Puritans intolerable. Moreover, while the United Colonies sided with the Parliament, Rhode Island was in sympathy with the king. This difference in social temperament and in religious and political predilections, formed a barrier of latent hostility between the two bodies, which was of no small advantage to Poloc. The Rhode Islanders received him cordially, fed him royally, and concealed him for the space of three months, when they got him on board a French ship and wished him God-speed. In three months' time he was safe in Paris, poor as a church mouse and with an exceedingly lively appetite. In this dilemma, he remembered that he had a natural turn for mechanics, so he turned cutler, set up a shop in Paris, and did a brisk trade in English knives and steel buckles.

At the Restoration, Charles II. did not for-

get to reward the man who had struck for him at Worcester, and had guarded him in his flight. He restored to him his confiscated estates, gave him five thousand pounds as an indemnity, and for his father's and his own services to the royal cause, the king created him a baronet on September the 3d, 1662. For some reason unknown to history, the Polocs at this time dropped the prefix which had clung to them for so many centuries, and their representative at the Restoration was known simply as Sir Ralph Poloc.

For another century, the Polocs maintained their wealth, power, and dignity. They exhibited no marks of decay, and among the many well-rooted families of the land, none seemed to promise a longer lease of life. Here was a family of quiet country gentlemen, in which there was no instance of the direct line being broken during seven hundred years. And what is, perhaps,

equally singular, except in two instances, one in the thirteenth century and the other in the fifteenth, the representative of the family had always borne the name of Ralph. Such a family might well have been looked upon as the *familia predilecta de la Fortuna y de la Historia*. Yet its days were numbered, and it fell suddenly and for ever. This was not the work of slow decay, nor the fruit of treason, nor the outcome of revolution. It was the work of one man, a fine gentleman, a voluptuary, and, above all, a gambler.

On the evening of the 2d of June 1764, a man who had been employed for some months as ostler at an old hostelry in the neighbourhood of Smithfield, entered the bar to have a drink with a stranger. The ostler had a bloated face, a trembling hand, and a sad look of premature old age. Suddenly the stranger laid his hand on the ostler's shoulder, and, with a loud

laugh, said, "I've nabbed you at last, sure as death! I arrest you, Sir Ralph——" Before the officer could utter another word, full in his face the ostler dashed a large jug filled with beer. And as the man sank bleeding and insensible to the floor, the ostler drew a pistol from his pocket and shot himself dead. Thus died at the age of thirty-six Sir Ralph Poloc, Bart., fifth in succession. It is recorded that the gay and fashionable world held its breath—for an unrecorded length of time—in painful surprise and horror, when it heard of the tragic end of one who for some years had been courted, flattered, and fooled as the soul of gaiety, the mirror of fashion, the prince of lady-killers, the pink of duellists, and the most inveterate gambler going. A sorry celebrity for a Poloc to enjoy; but enjoy it he did, and, unlike many other celebrities, he did his best to earn it, and he earned it.

His father dying when he was under five years of age, a very large sum of money was accumulated during Sir Ralph's minority; this, added to a rent-roll of sixteen thousand a-year, backed by a pedigree that would have illuminated a dukedom, afforded him a fair opportunity of giving the world a few lessons in the difficult Art of Living. He left Eton under a cloud, and Oxford without a degree. At ten years of age, he kept his harriers. At seventeen, he had a small seraglio. At twenty-two, he was laughing at the fun of the thing, because the wind had come into his coach, when he was full of wine and sleep, and snatched away, and carried to goodness knew where, for he did not, a lapful of bank-notes.

One eventful night ended a career that was full of social brilliance, of romantic episode, of eccentric adventure, of refined vice, of reckless extravagance and maddest

gambling. At the house of the well-known Lady Betty Pynchan, he sat down to play a rich man, and rose a beggar. He had gambled away all his estates. He left the gilded world with a smile upon his face, and passed completely out of sight, and nothing more was heard of him until the day when he put an end to his existence rather than face the King's Bench prison. He had availed himself of that solemn piece of legal jugglery formerly practised under the name of "suffering a common recovery," and by the aid of that cumbrous and questionable machinery had made a testamentary alienation of the whole of his property.

His only child, a lad of nine, inherited the title and a trunk full of odd heirlooms, and nothing besides. An orphan and absolutely penniless, he spent his childhood in the family of a poor man who had been one of his father's farm-labourers. At the age of

twelve he was apprenticed to the village shoemaker. He grew up, under the shadow of the hall that should have been his own but was now the home of strangers, silent, reserved, and melancholy. He was never anything but an indifferent craftsman; his shoes were marvels of clumsiness. As an engineer he might have done some respectable work, but as a shoemaker he was a failure. Nevertheless, the people of Poloc made it a point to buy his work, and to pay him for what they bought. They never forgot that the poor sad-visaged cobbler was Sir Ralph Poloc, whose forebears had been seated on the wooded hill since the days of the Conqueror. That Sir Ralph himself was not sitting in the venerable seat of his ancestors, instead of masquerading as one of themselves, was to them a dark mystery, a social nightmare. It made them feel uneasy, gave them a sense of unreality, and

favoured the gloomy suggestion that the end of all things was at hand.

After some years had passed away, it was suddenly discovered that Sir Ralph had still a claim to the old "Bull i' th' Thorn" and its accompanying five acres of moorland. When he took possession—which he did only after a wretched fight at law with the new Squire Crump, when all Poloc sided with their natural chief, and chimney-nooks and crannies in the thatched roofs and old worsted stockings gave up carefully hoarded pieces of gold and silver, and every man, woman, and child in the place, with the devotion of clansmen for their chief, gave something to help Sir Ralph to hold his own—the village went almost mad with delight. The land was coming back again to its true owners, they thought, and ere long the laws of nature would reassert themselves, the Polocs would have their own again, and the painful

suggestion of the approaching end of all things would soon be nothing more than a strange and startling memory. They lighted bonfires, they broached casks of beer, they sang and danced and shouted. And when at midnight they came to the front of the house, to cheer him and wish him good night, and good luck for the future, and the poor baronet began to say a few words and was overcome with emotion, then did a great wave of sympathy pass over them, so that women sobbed aloud, and the men passed away silently in the darkness, and the backs of many hands were raised facewards in a curious manner. The laws of nature, in the sense contemplated by the denizens of Poloc, failed to reassert themselves. The inheritance of the Polocs had gone for good.

For some years Sir Ralph lived a sort of hermit's life in the deserted and lonely inn on the edge of the moor. He grew more and more

reserved and solitary in manner and habit of life ; so that in course of time something of the weird and mysterious attached itself to him, and in the popular imagination, especially of the younger portion of the community, he embodied the ever pitiful, fascinating, and terrible idea of a victim of a Higher Power.

Sævæ memorem Junonis ob iram.

Somehow, no one seemed greatly surprised when Sir Ralph took to wife the daughter of the poor man, now dead, who had taken him into his family when a child. They had grown up together, and she had waited upon him hand and foot for years, with a devotion that apparently sprang from love. Yet Sir Ralph was as ignorant of her real character and motives as the rest of the little world in which she lived. She ruled her husband, not with a rod of iron, because a fern-stalk was strong enough ; and she bore him one child, named as a Poloc only could be named, Ralph.

CHAPTER III.

LADY POLOC PLAYS A GAME OF POKER.

A FEW minutes after Squire Crump had ridden away, and the heavy oaken door had banged unceremoniously behind him, the kitchen-door, on a level with the courtyard, opened, and a man came out, and crossing the yard slowly, entered the great cavernous barn that fronted the house with a wide-open mouth of blackness. His tall, slender figure was bowed, though not with age; while his slow, hesitating, almost tremulous gait suggested, not bodily feebleness so much as enervation of mind. The air of subjection and weakness of will that seemed to

characterize him, grew painful the instant one looked in his face. For it was a face of pathetic charm, such as lent immediate interest and distinction to the bent and stricken figure, with its old three-cornered hat, green-black with age; its heavy patched shoes, that seemed to cling with malicious tenacity to the ground; and its long smock-frock, yellow with long usage, and having a short cape on the shoulders. A pale, sad face, refined and gentle in expression, with features full of strange readings of strength, and of hints and flashes of superiority and pride that seemed to mock the depressed and vanquished figure of their owner.

This man with smock-frock and figure of abasement was Sir Ralph Poloc. *Sic volvere Parcas.* At one end of the empty barn was a small doorway—the door was off its hinges and lay close by on the grass—through which the young-old man passed. He tra-

versed a grass-grown rickyard and a small pasture, in which was a lean cow that stood gazing into vacancy, lost in melancholy rumination. Beyond the pasture was a patch of rough arable land, which a man was ploughing with a two-wheeled plough, drawn by a vicious-looking mule. Sir Ralph leaned upon the pasture-gate, and waited until the ploughman came along and halted his mule close to him.

“Well, dad, what is it? Are you going to try your hand at a furrow?” cried the ploughman, with a kindly tone and a cheery laugh.

“Nay, my lad, not to-day. Your mother sent me to tell you to stop the work and come in. That is, as soon as you’ve milked the cow.”

“What’s the hurry? It will be light for another hour or more. I want to finish this job to-day.”

“She wants you to get in a stock of wood before it is dark. Your mother is looking for company to-night, I fancy.”

“Company, eh? What company ever comes to the ‘Bull i’ th’ Thorn,’ unless it be——” The ploughman checked himself. His face grew suddenly dark and savage as the moor around him. “Is it those damned reevers again?” he asked in an angry tone.

“Not so loud, lad, nor so fierce! I don’t know. She has told me nothing more than that she looks for company to-night, if the sky suits. As ye hope for peace, Ralph, say nothing to anger her. It is none of my business—or thine, lad, for the matter of that. Happen we had both best keep out of it, till they’re away again,” answered Sir Ralph, in a tone of entreaty.

“She as good as promised last year that the thing should stop. It isn’t right, father.

It's confoundedly disreputable, if it isn't worse."

"Is it my doing, lad?" exclaimed Sir Ralph, pathetically.

Continued the ploughman energetically—"Poverty is bad enough, the Lord knows, when it is honourable and honest! But mix it with dishonour and it becomes hateful. It is like showing ulcers through your rags. Fancy a Poloc coming to that! No! not if I know it. I'll do as I said I would—clear out first."

"And I couldn't blame you, Ralph. You are your own master, lad, seeing that you are not married. But you would have to take care that somebody didn't guess what you were about, or—— There, there! what am I saying? When I am strong, I feel it would be best for you; at other times, the thought is more than I can bear. If you ever do it, do it suddenly, without anybody knowing—not even your old foolish father. No, no!

what am I saying? What would somebody say if she heard me? Lad, you mustn't do it. It would kill me."

A weak and pitiable figure did the subdued baronet make just then. He certainly seemed to be absolutely incapable of ever framing such a fiery message as the one that Lady Poloc flung, in his name, at Squire Crump. And, truth to tell, her ladyship resembled those historic jars that received water and gave forth wine, with this difference, that her ladyship's wine was very apt to be vinegar.

The son looked at the father, and his angry face grew light, and his eyes became very tender. "Nay, dad, it won't. If it had not been for mother, I should have been off, as you know, any time this last five years; and happen I should have made a fortune by now. But it's not too late yet. I'm only just turned twenty, and I——"

“Hush, hush! not another word. Somebody has ears that carry half-way to the moon. Come in, lad, now, and do as your mother wants you.”

Sir Ralph turned and walked half-way across the pasture, then he came back at a quick totter which was meant for a trot. The ploughman was driving the plough under the hedge, previous to unhitching the mule.

He looked up, as his father leaned over the gate, and said, “What now, dad?”

“If somebody should want you to take a—a situation somewhere as—as—nay, lad, you mustn’t swear—as a groom, before you accept it, Ralph, think about it, and—and refuse it. Not a word about me, lad, on your life. I couldn’t stand that, Ralph. A Poloc at Poloc Hall must be—master, eh, Ralph, or nothing at all? Be quick in, there’s a good lad.”

Then Sir Ralph tottered away towards the house, with a peaceful smile upon his beautiful face. The ploughman, meanwhile, stood for some little time frowning at the mule. At least the mule evidently thought that he was the object of his driver's intent and angry stare, for he laid his ears back, lowered his head with an air of hypocritical submission to any impending fate, and kept a sharp look-out from the corner of his eye.

The mule is not a handsome animal at his best, and, at his worst, he is the most disreputable and knavish-looking animal in creation, excepting always the lord of animals himself. This particular mule was one of the sorriest of his mongrel breed; yet, as an object of contemplation he was beauty itself, compared with the mental images that were flitting before Ralph's inward eye, throwing a gloomy anger into his dark amber eyes, and crumpling his broad white

brow. At length the mule grew nervous under this strange attack of silent and motionless reproach. Abuse he was superior to—and blows, though he did not relish, he understood ; but this new method of vilification was more than his delicately organised system could stand. Without more ado, he suddenly dropped his head lower than the lowest note of resignation, until in fact he reached the neighbouring angle of rebellion, when, with a smothered scream and a buck-jump, he began kicking as if his life depended on the activity of his hind feet.

The young man gave a slight start, and for a few moments watched the mule's performance with an amused expression of countenance. Then he said—

“Come, Nick, that is enough. The harness won't stand much more of your fun.”

The animal gave one more exhibition of heels, a final, supreme, and really magnifi-

cent effort, and instantly subsided into the ordinary unenthusiastic *mulo*. On his way to stable, Nick was joined by the melancholy cow, whose spirits had been revived by his fandango, which she had watched afar until the inspiration of the moment seized her, and she set off tearing round the pasture with her tail high up in air. Ralph curried and fed the mule, milked and pastured the cow, and then buckled to work sawing logs of firewood under one of the wain-sheds. He whistled as he worked, ever and anon breaking out in song, when his fine melodious baritone awoke the echoes of the courtyard, that fled through the great pile of decayed outbuildings, rousing the bats almost from their long wisdom-sleep, and causing the grey mice to stop their gambols, listen, blink, palpitate, and wonder.

When Ralph had sawn and split what he thought would be enough to last out the

longest and the coldest night of the year, he put the wood into a heavy wheel-barrow, wheeled it into the house, and stacked the logs on one side of the large open fireplace, in which as yet there was no fire. There were two fireplaces in this room—the kitchen—one large enough to roast a sheep in front, and the other a small cottage-grate, that held just enough fire to warm the black cat, that sat on the top of the fender and did nothing all day long but turn first one side and then another to the handful of fire in the grate. The open fireplace was a dead hearth and a howling wind-vent all the year round, save on those special occasions when Lady Poloc received company—if the sky suited.

Ralph was stacking the second barrow-load of logs, when his mother said to him—

“You had better sit you down and have your supper now, Rafe.”

"All right, mother; I'm hungry enough. I will be ready in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes isn't now. I said—Now," cried her ladyship, in streperous and strident tones.

"Do you mean, mother, that I am to leave the barrow here in the middle of the room? Because now's now, if you are so very strict," answered Ralph, with an evident effort to soften his voice and keep down, at least so far as his tongue went, the flash of temper that was already in his eyes.

"Let me have none of your sauce here, young man, or I'll speedily give you some dressing. Put that barrow outside, and then come you straight to your supper, or go without it altogether, sir!"

There was something extremely irritating in the open contempt that Lady Poloc manifested for the *suaviter in modo* exercise of authority. Nick, who was only a mule,

would have kicked at such brutal jerking of the reins and rasping of the mouth ; Peggy, who was only a melancholy cow, would have felt that self-respect compelled her to conscientiously put her foot in the milk-pail ; even the grunter, Jeshurun—so called because he waxed fat—who roamed about the premises much as a dog would do, would have resented such treatment by entering the forbidden garden, and playing havoc with the winter cabbages. These, in truth, were four-legged animals, and, as such, were questionless entitled to exactly as much again consideration as an animal possessing only two legs. On the other hand, their friend and master, young Mr Ralph, could boast a little red member of such wonderful speaking power that Jeshurun, Peggy, and Nick had long since come to an agreement that he was worthy of being ranked as a four-footed creature.

Just now, as Ralph put down the barrow and stood facing his mother, there came over him a spirit of revolt, darker and stronger than anything that could be yielded from the combined rebelliousness of grunter, cow, and mule.

“I have been working in the ploughed field, and in the cow-house, and in the woodshed. Am I not to have a wash, mother, before I eat my supper?”

Remarkably quiet and calm was Ralph in tone and manner, but his head was a little higher up than usual, and his mouth was closed firm as a vice. Lady Poloc knew very well what kind of spirit she had aroused in him; he had got the bit between his teeth, and in another second he would be going at his own pace, and she could do nothing with him. She could never tell beforehand what would rouse him, and what would not. Usually, he submitted to her

arbitrary will almost as passively as Sir Ralph himself; then again, as now, he would suddenly draw up and resist, and rather die than yield. Lady Poloc detested such capriciousness and uncertainty of disposition, which made her feel never sure of her ground. She was unable to register, with any degree of certainty, the progress she was making in the subjugation of Ralph's will; and, what was worse still, she was always liable to surprise, sudden rebellion, and open defeat. She saw now that Ralph was on his mettle; that unless she retreated from her position, she would be once more vanquished. Seeing this, her imperious and loveless soul filled with fury and madness.

With a quick turn she seized the poker, and exclaiming, "Ye'll jaw me, will ye!" she aimed a blow at her son's head that would have cracked it like a nutshell, had it carried.

It is an open question if, by warding off a fatal attack, destiny ever does a substantial kindness to any one threatened. But Ralph Poloc, though thoroughly disgusted with his lot, and often tempted to wish himself dead, had a perfectly intelligible repugnance to being murdered. By a quick movement he barely escaped the blow his mother aimed at him; to seize her wrist with one hand and wrench the weapon from her grasp with the other, was the work of a moment.

“Mother,” said the young man, coolly, “you are a fool. Do you think I shall stand still and let you kill me? If it comes to blows, I could—though God forbid I should ever lift a finger against you. But after this, mother, I must clear out, whether you like it or not.”

He turned away without another word, put the poker on the fender, removed the wheelbarrow, and then went up-stairs to wash.

Except on Sundays, not oftener than once a-week, and frequently not for weeks together, did Poloc think it worth while to change from his rough, coarse farm-clothes into his Sunday best suit, when his day's work was done. Not that he was lazy, or boorish, or slovenly; on the contrary, his habits of personal cleanliness were such as became his gentle birth rather than his poverty-stricken lot.

Habits are not always consolidated instincts and tastes; not infrequently they are little more than compulsory conventionalities, stiffened into custom but not welded into second nature. With every temptation to make common cause with vulgarity and dirt, Poloc, following the bent of his nature and defying the tyranny of circumstances, remained curiously nice and delicate in his habits and tastes. But though water was cheap enough—and Poloc revelled in this

sweet beggar's luxury night and morning—clean linen was another matter, especially when Lady Poloc was the laundress; while the man who could renew his Sunday best suit only once in four years, could hardly have expected to make a presentable appearance to the end, had he worn it every night in the kitchen. This was Poloc's position, and he made the best he could of it, like a wise man. The result, however, was, that whenever he appeared in his Sunday best, his mother instantly knew that he was going to spend the evening out. And it was not always pleasant for him to meet the invariable string of questions with which his mother encountered him.

This evening, however, when Poloc came down-stairs, having changed his clothes, her ladyship, who by this had recovered her equanimity, did not venture to put any questions. She was rather pleased that the

young man, who was afflicted, as she held it, with certain ridiculous whims, and quixotic notions of what constituted honesty of conduct, should withdraw himself and his absurd prejudices from home for some hours. If he had only had an ounce, or even half an ounce, of gumption, in place of his thumping pound of silly high-flown principle, he would have made a most valuable auxiliary, she thought within herself. A shrewd, witty, nimble fellow would have been able to extract more than one golden sovereign from opportunities that lay in his path, but which Poloc disdained to utilize.

It was disheartening and almost disgraceful to have such an obstinate, witless son to call one's own; but the good woman was somewhat soothed by the reflection that what could not be cured must be endured; and since Providence had seen fit to impose such a burden upon her, it was her Christian duty

to bow with at least simulated resignation to a will higher and stronger, and, seemingly, harder than her own.

For let no one lightly imagine that Lady Poloc scoffed at religion, or even turned to it a deaf ear or a cold shoulder. She was a devout woman, and attended church summer and winter, wet or dry, with exemplary regularity. The parson held the opinion, and spread it through the parish, that among all his parishioners he knew of none that was in a more "salvable condition" than Lady Poloc. She made it a point of conscience to give to the church a tenth of any small sum she might be fortunate enough to make by receiving company—if the sky suited; while another tenth was demurely set apart solely for personal attire, in which she could attend divine service with a comfortable sense of not looking exactly like a pauper or a peasant.

In his Sunday best suit, which consisted of a dark-blue coat, with a high collar stiffly turned back, and cut short at the waist, below which appeared some inches of an embroidered waistcoat, a large light-blue cravat round his neck tied loosely in bows, drab pantaloons that reached to the middle of his calf, and joined by half top-boots, Ralph Poloc looked quite another man from what he did when driving plough. To be sure, his clothes were well worn, and their style was provincial and slightly antique; but the fit was good, the colour was quiet and in good taste, and the wearer carried himself with an easy grace that was quite beyond the reach of the ordinary yeoman's son.

The genuine Bond Street loungeur would questionless have been amazed and appalled at the antiquated provincialism of Poloc's attire, but that superior creature would

certainly not have failed to recognize in Poloc the veritable though quaint and crude image of a gentleman. He was a tall strapping fellow, with dark hair and moustache, and with the face of a—Poloc.

The Poloc face was always a thing of pathetic beauty. Full of soul and intellect and a subtile pride that added to its charm, it was lacking in mastery, in animality, in the brute strength without which no man's face is an adequate expression of complete manhood. A delicate shadow ever rested upon the face, *digamoslo así*, the historic forecast of the sadness to come. Refinement, high-breeding, exquisite sensibility, were stamped in unmistakeable characters; but the long oval outline of the Poloc face had never enclosed, among its mysterious ridges and hollows and curves, any sign or token of the firm will, the clear purpose, the willingness to begin, the willingness to keep on, the willingness never to

give up, such as characterizes and makes worthy of close attention the face of the British bull-dog. And though Poloc, any time within the previous five hundred years, might have reproachfully enquired, Is thy servant a dog? it would always have been a true answer that, as alloy enhances the practical value of gold, so a streak of the dog in their nature would have stiffened it to the baser uses of humanity.

Poloc got his hat and stick, and was making for the door when his mother called out, from the far end of the long kitchen—

“You have not had your supper yet, Rafe.”

“I didn’t know there was any for me,” answered Poloc, making a momentary halt.

“Then whose is that on the table, I’d like to know?”

“I didn’t know it was mine. But if it is, I am ready for it.”

So saying, he put down his hat and stick, and sat down to his meal, that was humble enough to have merited the contempt of an ordinary high-stomached beggar. What with his beggarly supper and his wretched surroundings, Poloc in his Sunday best made a strangely incongruous figure, in the flickering light of the solitary candle that stood at his elbow on the long massive old table, and just managed to bring out in relief the bare board, the brown loaf, the broken plate with a small lump of cheese, the water-jug with a cut lip, and the beautiful profile of the young fellow, who ate as if the gods had taught him the art of extracting the divine flavours that lurk unsuspected in the commonest of comestibles.

Watching him from out the thick gloom that enveloped the rest of the room, Lady Poloc thought that, failing to be the squire, her lad would make a fine squire's groom.

She was just wondering if she had not better tell him of the Squire's offer at once, when suddenly a strange unearthly noise was heard somewhere outside. For some little time the outside air was full of the weirdest moanings and groanings, wailings and screechings, that ever issued out of darkness and entered into the superstitious, sound-distorting ear of mortal man. To Chaucer, and even to Shakespeare, the hideous cacophony would have sounded quite familiar; but times and practices and sounds had come and gone since their days, and a discord that for many a long year had been as well known in every English village as is the scraping of a fiddle to-day, smote upon the listeners as a mysterious and gruesome din.

Sir Ralph rose from his arm-chair beside the fireplace—from which he had not stirred an inch during the poker episode—and stared out through the low wide window,

with a look upon his face of a man who saw a vision. While her ladyship was dimly visible at the far end of the room steadying herself by the old dresser, while she repeated aloud in full nervous tones the Apostles' Creed. Poloc pushed his now empty plate on one side, seized his hat and stick, and made for the door. Before he had taken three steps the vile dissonance was at an end, and there came the clear martial notes of a bagpipe, shaking the blood to the battle-tune of the "Campbells are coming." Lady Poloc brought her confession of faith to an abrupt end, while Sir Ralph sank down into his chair with a sweet smile upon his face.

Poloc burst out laughing. "I wonder who it is? Some strolling vagabond who thinks he is earning a night's shelter, I suppose," he said.

"No shelter for vagabonds here. They would murder us all, or burn the house

down, or do some mischief or other. Send him off, Ralph; give him a lump of bread, and send him off. No shelter for vagabonds here," said Sir Ralph, speaking slowly, and smiling to himself.

"You mind your own business, Rafe. If he's to go, I'll send him. Happen we are a pretty pack of fools!" cried Lady Poloc, who would have been very glad at this moment to erase from her memory every trace of the Apostles' Creed.

All at once a new idea seemed to strike her.

"If you are going out, Rafe, you had better go at once. I'm going to have company to-night, and I fancy this hullabaloo is a sign they're at hand. I'll go and make sure," she said, snatching up a stick and leaving the kitchen.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LITTLE GODS AT WORK.

THE river Scarthin ran through Poloc, and one of the most picturesque walks in the neighbourhood was along the river-side as far as Voe, five or six miles down-stream. About two miles out of Poloc the river washed against a bit of the wall that surrounded Muskerry Park, three hundred acres in extent. The deer, donkeys, and black-haired sheep must have been difficult animals to please, if they were not all of them in love with their walled domain. There were patches of fine timber therein, and black rocks, and deep valleys, a long avenue

of yews from the gate-house to the hall, winding terraces, undulating banks, a lake along which a couple of swans made their stately progress, two or three ever-merry streamlets, swift-footed, bright-eyed, sweet-tongued, their heads—where they issued from their dark homes underground—crowned and half-concealed with their hanging glory of moss, and liverwort, and mother-of-thousands, and other growths smaller in bulk, less able to assert themselves, but yielding to none in purity of colour and grace of structure.

The house, which stood in a corner of the park, was an ancient stone structure of considerable size, with round towers, steep slated roofs, notched gables, and three-cornered chimneys. On the walls of the western and more modern portion of the building was the date 1621. There was a *porte cochère*, and a large central court divided in

two. Queen Elizabeth once slept in this house, and it is recorded that her Majesty remarked to her host, Sir Percival Muskerrey, that the court of the house would appear more handsome if divided in the middle. It chanced that a troop of London workmen were at that time employed on the ducal residence some fifteen miles off. That same night, Sir Percival posts off to his Grace, and secures all the workmen, who labour swiftly and silently all night long. In the morning, her Majesty takes another look at the court, and, behold, it is now divided in the middle ! Loyalty was not all lip-service in those days. The grand hall in the interior was designed by Inigo Jones, and the ceiling of the white marble staircase was painted by Rubens, and represented the Apotheosis of William the Silent, with the usual display of allegorical figures.

Just about the time that the stirring notes

of the Scotch bagpipe were sounding at the "Bull i' th' Thorn," a long-limbed pretty girl entered one of the principal living-rooms at Muskerry Hall, put an extra log on the blazing fire, and then seated herself in the most comfortable—or least uncomfortable—chair she could find, and gave her fingers to wool-work, and her mind to her own sweet fancies. The room was well furnished, and there was a more or less successful attempt at the fashionable *dérangement* of sofas, tables, chairs, and ornaments. There was a small bookcase nearly full of books, there were bronze figures and marble busts, which did their best to impart an air of refinement and intellectuality to the apartment.

The total effect, however, was scarcely what had been aimed at, and was little less than that of incongruity, startling and laughable. This was due entirely to the walls, which were of a deep-yellow colour, on which were

pasted prints with narrow paper borders, and arranged, oddly enough, with an evident view to pleasing the eye. There were no other pictures in the room, save one, and that one bore the name of Guenilda Muskerri, and was—what most good pictures are not—alive. Being alive, she was worth more than all the dead pictures in creation.

It is the work of painters to magnify their craft. Therefore, like shrewd men, they note Nature's shortcomings in large characters, and succeed in awakening our pity, and almost our contempt, for the Power that is unequal to the task of realising its own ideas, that can strive in a million efforts and only half succeed in one. Meanwhile they, the shrewd men, talk beautifully concerning the idealistic reaches of their craft, and compel us, the simple men, to the worship of Art as the exponent, the interpreter, the golden-tongued mouthpiece, and, if not the author,

certainly the finisher of nature. It is all true, of course, and in doubting any particle of it, we should evince an ignorance that would startle even a reviewer. Nevertheless, one cannot help being haunted at times by the absurd idea, that there is in life an element of beauty often found that altogether transcends any idealistic reach of Art.

We know that stumbling dreaming Nature totters along on crutches until Art stitches on her wings, and that any thought to the contrary is very wicked and a mark of ill condition. Yet such is the force of natural depravity within us, that we do at times lean to the terrible heresy, that in every generation the best work of the best artist has been absolutely surpassed, in every great principle and fine detail of true artistry, by some living type of beauty. Be that as it may, it is certain that few men could have looked at the face of Guenilda Muskerry, as she sat

with her hands on her lap, and her eyes resting on the crackling wood-fire, without feeling that there was a certain element in the girl's loveliness that no known art could reproduce, or even adequately suggest. In marble or on canvas, one could get the craftsman's crafty touches of the ideal; but sorry substitutes would they have been for that vital and elusive quality that was the characteristic and mysterious hall-mark of her beauty.

Guenilda was a brunette, and therefore on that side of the beauty-line where most of the women famed in history for their charms are to be found. Her complexion was pure and rich, her eyes were of a deep violet colour, and her lips were sweet curves of passion. A creature of sensibility, of warmth, of sympathy, of fidelity was Guenilda Muskerry. In her repose of feature and dignity of carriage, she appeared a girl

of independent judgment and firm will—not lightly to be trifled with or easily won. An enemy would have hesitated as to the wisdom of charging her with being a lover of romance ; yet a friend might have done it, and have hit the mark.

Life at Muskerry Hall was apt to become monotonous and dull ; it was as regular as the clock in the east tower—as formal as Gerard himself, the portly red-faced butler. Her uncle, Mr Percival Muskerry, an inferior-looking copy of the great Gerard, was a widower and a social dead-weight. Fond of hunting, of which there was very little to be had, and of shooting, of which there was any amount, he spent his days in the woods and the saddle, and his evenings in his arm-chair asleep. “ Percie,” his only child, was a jocund young spark of twenty, who did not quite know as yet whether he stood on his head or his heels, and was quite undecided

whether to develop into a man of pleasure, as his friend " Archie " Crump had made up his mind to become, or into a respectable country gentleman like — his father. He winced at the similitude.

The Man of Pleasure was a fancy figure, novel and attractive; but his father was a hard reality, solid, commonplace, utterly barren of pleasant suggestions, or of possibilities, delicious and piquant. Meanwhile, the young fellow, while running along the parental lines of solid respectability, thought it only fair to give the Man of Pleasure within him an occasional inning in a small way. So it came to pass that he was known to every pretty rustic lass within a radius of ten miles. He was not a vicious fellow, and though he took French leave of many pretty lips, his kisses were not treacherous, only frankly impudent; and the maidens never cut him for his impudence, or turned

a corner to avoid him. He liked his cousin Guen immensely, and in his own mind always pictured her marrying a — Judge. This was cruel, but he did really think that her dignity was equal to that of the judicial bench, and that none but a judge would be able to match her.

Guen found her uncle heavy, and her cousin light. She was an heiress in her own right, and was just turned eighteen, and if she married before she was twenty-one, without the consent of her uncle, she lost one-half of her fortune. Such a girl, it would seem, was admirably placed for becoming the heroine — or the victim — of a pretty piece of romance. Heroine or victim, because what to the reader is romance, to the actor is not infrequently a piece of experience that strikes the consciousness with its sternness, painfulness, and misfortune. Sundry losses have to be accounted

for, and divers wounds to be healed, and memory veiled and softened by the haze of time, before the trick of imagination can be wrought, and what was suffered as something akin to grim tragedy can assume the winning shape and absorb the rare dyes of romance.

The girl came out of her reverie with a start, as the wind brought within hearing the distant wail of a plover. She rose to her feet, and stood listening, then she crossed the room, and, drawing aside the heavy curtains, leaned against a large window that was glazed diagonally, with mahogany wood-work, and folding-doors *à la Française*. Her face was a study in that unstudied moment. Glad surprise was in it, and radiant joy, and a woman's love, and a maiden's delicious shame. The cry was repeated three times at short intervals. Then the girl drew back with a little

laugh of overflowing gladness, and left the room. In a very little time she returned, and enveloping herself in a rich fur cloak, opened the window and stepped out into the darkness. She made her way to a secluded frescade in the grounds, where was a stone belvedere, and, hard by on a natural hillock, a marble statue of Good Queen Bess on a pedestal of native rock.

Seated on the pedestal was Ralph Poloc. As Guenilda drew near, Poloc gave a low whistle of recognition, and came forward quickly.

“ My Darling ! ”

“ My Love ! ”

Had her Majesty's marble ears been open, she might have caught the tender exclamations of the lovers, for the wind set in that direction. The two met in a thick shade, star-proof at the best of times ; but there was no moon or star or other be-

traying light in the sky to-night. Still it needed no cat's eye to make out that the two walking columns of blackness drew nearer and nearer to each other, until they lost their identity and melted into one compact body of darkness. A pretty situation this for the stony eyes of the great queen to look upon,—a lovers' meeting under the very nose of her Royal Virginity. But the little gods, who have no dignity to keep up, and while away eternity by making sport of time and its creatures, smiled, blinked, and winked at the bristling bit of comedy they had succeeded in patching up.

Here was the richest girl in the county, and one of the most beautiful in the kingdom, whose hand had been sought by high-born gentlemen — whom she rather maliciously divided into those of the empty purse and those of the empty head — and

descended from a noble stock, holding stolen interviews with a penniless young man, who drove a disreputable, if sapient, mule, and walked at the plough-tail. The small divinities chuckled under their masks, as they always do so often as their impish tricks and mischievous devices prosper; for above all else, they are lovers of salt and haters of insipidity—two things in which they find themselves apart from their very dear friends who people the face of earth.

It was no wanton or ill-bred strain, no defect of blood or brain, that induced Guenilda Muskerry to look with tender eyes upon Ralph Poloc. Whatever construction the members of the clan Empty might be tempted to put upon her conduct, it was certain that for twenty miles round Poloc only one opinion would be held by hillsmen and dalesmen—to wit, that in giving her love to Ralph Poloc, Guenilda Muskerry had shown that

it was really possible for good common-sense to be allied with exceeding great beauty. The Muskerry stock was an old one, and had once been noble ; indeed, its nobility was its weakness, being at the wrong end. It had started noble — a bad sign : its nobility marked its sudden rise from Nothingness.

Nobility should represent the strong maturity and fruit-bearing glory of the human tree, and not the first quick shoot from the soil. But taken at his best, who was a Muskerry beside a Poloc ? Four hundred years of local tradition was behind the latter, when the mushroom nobility and being of the former first sprang. Poloc was poor. Were the supercilious members of the clan Empty rich ? When he was driving Nick, or feeding Jeshurun, or milking Peggy, in his coarse, patched, and not over-clean farm-clothes, Poloc did not look exactly the gentleman, and had no desire to. But in his Sunday

best suit, rusty though it was with long and faithful service, who dare say that he was not the gentleman from head to heel? The people of Poloc, when they came across the young fellow in his rough attire, had a sense of shame, would feign not to see him, and practised many little evasions that had their root in delicacy of feeling. But when they saw him in his Sunday best, a warm and happy glow came over them, as though they had just heard good news. They all saw him then; they went out of their way to let him see that they saw him, and they rendered him every salutation of honour and respect. He was their natural head, the heir of the Polocs, the last of his race: they loved him, they pitied him, they were proud of him; he bore his misfortune so bravely, so cheerily, and never fell below his natural rank.

If Guenilda Muskerry had the good sense to put her money out to advantage, she

would invest it in Master Rafe, and thank heaven for giving her wit and an opportunity of using it. So thought the men and women of the valleys and the hills; but the small divinities, who would never have gone to so much trouble just to humour the small humanities, knew that there were those that thought otherwise. That was where the little gods found their fun.

“Ralph, you are not serious? You do not mean it?” said the girl in a grave tone, after they had been talking together some minutes.

“I am serious, and I mean it. I am going away from home. But that need not interfere with our love. You will be true to me, Guen, I know, whether I am far or near.”

“Yes, yes; but—— Oh, Ralph, why need you go?”

“For many reasons. I can’t stand it any longer—I mean the life I have to lead. And

why should I? Father is broken down, broken in spirit. He will never lift himself up; he hasn't got stamina enough left in him. Here am I, chock-full of strength, leading the life of a day-labourer, and yet the wide world is open to me. For seven hundred years the Polocs gathered and held; it took them so long to grow the one great Fool of the Family, which speaks well, I think, for their average wisdom. But because one man broke them, must they remain for ever broken? Guen, it is my duty to do all that a man in honour and honesty may to rebuild our broken house. As you know, mother has always set her face against it hitherto, but she must yield now or be overridden," said Poloc, with the fluency that never fails to come with strong feeling.

Guenilda liked his stout courage; and the firm resolve to do and dare all for the honour of his name, struck upon her like a sudden

burst of martial music. Her heart had told her again and again that her lover was not lacking the invincible quality that became his race ; that some day he would rise up and say to her, I must go and rebuild the house of my fathers. She had waited silently and full of faith, and now the hour had come and the very words, almost. The girl trembled with excitement at his words, and her heart grew big with proud love. At the same time, she was not at all prepared to let him go from her, though his mission was to make his fortune and refurbish his tarnished fame.

She put her arms round his neck and kissed him, murmuring—

“ My brave love, my brave love ! ”

Then, as she disengaged herself, she said, with the inconsistency of her delightful sex—

“ But, Ralph, why should you go away at all ? There is no need. We shall——”

She checked herself for a moment, and then she said almost in a whisper, while a deep blush spent itself unseen in the darkness upon her face—

“Cannot you wait three years? You will have enough then, Ralph, to do all you wish.”

“Don’t ask me, Guen. Three months would be more than enough, after what has occurred. Besides, think what I might be able to do in three years. I do not want people to say that I married you for your money.”

The girl made a gesture of impatience.

“What will it matter to us what people say? None would utter such a wretched thought except those, perhaps, who are prepared to act upon it. If you had gone two or three years ago——”

“Thank God, I did not! I should never have known you then, sweetheart.”

"And now you have me, you want to leave me."

"Listen, Guen. This afternoon Squire Crump was at the 'Bull i' th' Thorn.' I wonder could you guess what he wanted?"

"No, indeed I could not. I think he means well, but he is a low-bred man."

"Yes; he is not such a good fellow as his son, at any rate."

"You are perhaps right, love. But Mr Archibald is not a good man, I am sure. I always shudder when he comes near me. Percie thinks a good deal of him, I am sorry to say. But Mr Crump, what did he want?"

"He had it in his mind to do me a good turn, I suppose, and so he offered me a situation at the Hall as—as his—groom."

"Ralph, is that true?"

"Quite true."

"Oh, what an insult! You, a Poloc,

groom at Poloc Hall! Groom to Mr Crump! How dare he! I will cut him dead for his insolence. Ralph Poloc, what did you say to him?"

"Well, I am glad I had to say nothing. I was not in at the time; I was ploughing. He left word with mother."

"What did your mother say?"

"I don't quite know; I have only heard of it through father yet. But I fancy she thanked him."

"Thanked him! Oh, Ralph!"

"I shall probably hear about it in the morning. You see what it has come to, Guen. Do you think I could stand three years more of it?"

She came and nestled close to him, murmuring, "My poor boy, my poor brave boy."

Continued Poloc, in a low voice, "There are other things worse than that to bear."

"Not worse, Ralph, surely?"

"Yes, worse." He paused.

"Do you mind telling me, dearest?"

"Yes. I cannot tell you, Guen. For one thing, however, I will be no party to what I think is a disgrace to my name. But there! you do not know what I mean, and I cannot tell you. If you were at the 'Bull i' th' Thorn' just now, perhaps you would know."

For some little time neither of the two spoke, then Poloc said—

"I am sorry to say that mother and I had a bit of a quarrel this evening. She is very passionate, and loses control of herself when she is angered. But I would not go through the same experience again—not for my right hand."

"Oh, it's very, very sad! My heart bleeds for you, my love. But where could you go? What could you do?" exclaimed Guenilda.

"I could at least enlist, and go to Spain."

"And get killed."

“Very likely.”

“And not make your fortune after all.”

“What better fortune could I have?”

Poloc spoke bitterly, for his spirit was heavy with gloom.

“Is death preferable to life?”

“I sometimes think it is.”

“When I am part of life?”

“Ah, but you are not mine, love! I may be dead, dead, long before you can be mine,” exclaimed Poloc, with passionate energy.

“You are gloomy to-night, my love. You are wounded in spirit, you are suffering. But you must not be bitter, you must not be hopeless. Time will soon fly, dearest, and then——”

“Ha! then, then it would be heaven! By the same token, I look for hell. Guen, my love is steady as the stars; I believe yours is the same. And yet, do you know, I feel sometimes—I feel now, now while your dear

form is held in my arms, that I shall never call you my own. Not love will fail us, but the malicious demon that people call Good Fortune. Circumstances, Guen, are the stones that build up the walls, the prison-walls of destiny. Something tells me they will rise up between us and keep us apart. I will live till then, and fight the demon; afterwards I will die, cursing him."

Shiver after shiver ran through Guenilda as she listened to her lover's sombre words. But she knew it was only his trouble that was upon him, and her duty was to cheer him. Therefore she kissed him, and said, laughing—

"I would not give sixpence for you as a prophet, sweetheart."

She hesitated a moment before she said—

"Ralph, cannot I do something for you? something that will keep you from leaving me?"

“No, love ; I must go.”

“Think, my love ; I can do a great deal if I try. Cannot I do anything to keep you ?”

“Kiss me.”

She kissed him. Then he gave a quick laugh and said—

“I know one thing you could do to keep me with you.”

“What, love ?”

“Go with me to Gretna Green.”

“You naughty, wicked fellow !”

Then with a burning face and a palpitating heart, she disengaged herself and ran away, leaving him all alone.

CHAPTER V.

THE COMING OF THE REEVERS.

WHEN Lady Poloc re-entered the kitchen, she found it empty, both husband and son having disappeared. Poloc was on his way to Muskerrey Hall, and Sir Ralph had quietly stowed himself away in bed, where he covered his head with a blanket to shut out all sound, and proceeded to salve his conscience with that excellently good specific—a sound sleep. Behind her ladyship came a rough country-looking fellow, with a bagpipe in his arms, and at his heels a pure-bred bull-dog. The man looked at the flickering candle, at the handful of fire

in the small grate, at his dog, and at Lady Poloc. There was nothing else recognizable, in the darkness that reigned in the room. The man sighed deeply. Then, thinking better of it, he swore under his breath.

“What is the matter?” enquired her ladyship, with a snap of her jaws that made the piper think for a moment his bull-dog had bitten him.

“I was just remarking to myself what a lively place for a dance this looks. As warm as a well, and as light as a cave. Once in, the order of the day is, there you stop till daylight doth appear, or take the risk of falling down the cellar-steps, if you try to find the door. Won’t the boys just howl for joy!”

And pressing his bagpipe, there came forth a demoniacal howl that would have struck a pack of hungry wolves with despair.

No lupous throat was ever equal to such an echo of inferno. Cried her ladyship, sharply—

“Young man, what's your name, if you've got one?”

“I'm called Jake, the piper of Pearthwick,” answered the man.

“I don't recollect of seeing you before at the ‘Bull i' th' Thorn.’”

“For a very good reason. It's the first time I ever put my eyes on the place. Though I've heard about it often enough from the boys.”

“I thought as much. Do you know who I am?”

“I reckon you be Mrs—Lady Poloc?”

Her ladyship stepped to the fireplace, and, picking up the poker,—the same with which she had assailed Poloc,—came and held it close to the man's face, and said—

“See this? What is it?”

"Gad! I should call it a poker," answered the man, laughing a little nervously.

He looked round, as if to see how far he was from the door; then he began to back slowly.

"Where are you going to? Stand still and listen to me. Ye are right. I'm Lady Poloc, and this bit of iron is a poker. And I warn ye, Jake, piper of Pearthwick, that if ye make another noise like that ye've just made, or play any of your tricks in my house, I'll brain ye as I would a mad dog. Ye understand?" she cried, giving the poker a fine flourish above her head.

"Yes, your ladyship, yes; and may God forgie me for ever venturing within a hundred miles of your ladyship's anger!" stammered Jake, now thoroughly appalled.

In the semi-darkness, the figure of the woman seemed colossal and terrific to him.

"All right; then we'll be friends. If

the room's dark, it must be lighted. If it's cold, it must be warmed. The candles are where I put them, and the wood is there by the grate," said her ladyship, pointing to a part of the room that was buried in darkness.

"The Lord have mercy on me! but I'm going blind, sure. I can see nought of a grate or anything else, save the light of your ladyship's beautiful eyes."

Her ladyship gave a sudden flourish of the poker. With a groan, plump down on his knees went the piper of Pearthwick.

"Mercy, mercy!" he gasped, in terrified accents. Even the bull-dog had fled with a howl and hid himself in the dark. Whereupon her ladyship laughed aloud, and said—

"Well, if ye don't wear the white feather as bravely as a goose, I'm out o' my reckoning. Put the poker about ye, piper o' Pearthwick! Fight a butterfly with a

hammer! Get up, or I'll prod ye with the toasting-fork!"

The piper got on to his feet, thinking within himself that death was preferable to life. It seemed like a hideous nightmare. For oddly enough, Jake, the piper of Pearthwick, had a reputation for courage, and that among men who, whatever may have been their failings, were brave enough in all conscience. He had been in conflict with his Majesty's troops, officers of the law, and revenue officials more than once, in the course of a chequered career. He had fought like a true Briton and never flinched; yet here he was, charged with wearing the white feather, and threatened with the toasting-fork, by a woman. And to crown all, the piper felt that he was really mortally frightened. How to account for it he did not know, unless it was due to the darkness of the vast cave-like kitchen, and the furious

aspect of the strange woman, of whom he had heard many extraordinary stories told. He would have scouted as ridiculous the suggestion that the heavy drinking-bout in which he had recently taken part, had any bearing upon the demoralized state of his nerves.

Piloted by her ladyship, candle in hand, the piper at length hove in sight of the huge fireplace and the barrow-loads of logs.

"There, piper o' Pearthwick, that's the hearth, and——don't be scared, man. Them be only logs of wood. They won't bite, though happen they'll burn. D'ye think now ye could light a fire, if ye tried?" said her ladyship, in a cutting tone.

"I'm willing to try," answered the piper, humbly enough, but with his inside hot with smothered rage.

"And ye'll not be frightened? You see, I've got to leave ye a few minutes, and go

t'other side of the room. But if ye call I shall hear ye."

At which the piper groaned in spirit, and made a desperate plunge among the logs, feeling that his only hope lay in a blazing fire. When once the bright flames began leaping up the chimney, the cold would vanish, and the blackness that seemed to choke him, and the grimness of the unseen, and the grisly and unintelligible fear that held him like the claws of an invisible monster.

Meanwhile, from half-a-dozen different points of the compass, small bands of men were crossing Redstag moor; they were slowly converging towards one spot, and their faces were turned towards the "Bull i' th' Thorn." To their thinking, it was a grand night, for the sky was a mass of black cloud, and a piercing cold wind went tearing over the ground, filling the night

with sad noises, with wailings and moanings. Whoso was abroad that night had urgent business, they were sure : for honest folk and not o'er-brave, there would be no place like the chimney-corner or the blankets.

Some miles back, in secluded hollows and glens, under the shelter of rocks and woods, our travellers had left their women-folk and children, together with their gipsy caravans, pedlars' carts and tents, in the safe keeping of their savage dogs. They had come scores and scores of miles, some from the far north and some from the far south ; and of such punctual habits were these roving gentry, that, though they had not seen each other for a twelvemonth, they were all at the same hour within a few miles of their meeting-place. Though not star-gazers, they were to a man sky-watchers ; and had it been a clear night, not one of them would have been found within a dozen miles of the

“Bull i’ th’ Thorn.” What were they? Speaking the dialect of Poloc, her ladyship knew them as the Reevers. In daylight and to the common eye, they were folk that gathered to themselves something of the picturesque.

The play of the national imagination is often very odd, and forms a most singular study. This is the case, for instance, in regard of Pedlars and Gipsies. How comes it that for an English eye the very words “Pedlar” and “Gipsy” are steeped in the magic colours of romance? How comes it that the very syllables awake in an English ear a melody all their own, notes of the mysterious chord that voices the old, old sacred music of our childhood? There is something odd in this quaint, irrational, semi-affectionate play of the national imagination.

In daylight and to the common eye,

some of the Reeves were gipsies, and others were pedlars. The former sold baskets and clothes-pegs, told you a good fortune for a sixpence and a better for a shilling, had remedies for most complaints and dispensed them for a consideration, doctored sick horses, bought sorry ones, and stole—but there! such general benefactors of mankind could afford to overlook the prejudices of the incurably stupid and the slanders of the wantonly malicious. Nor did the pedlars escape suspicion and detraction; but, for some occult reason, the women were their friends and stood up for them, and so the vilification of the men was so much wasted breath.

In village, hamlet, wayside cottage, and lonely farmhouse, the pedlar was always sure of a warm welcome and a good night's lodging. At the opening of his wonderful pack, cheeks flushed, eyes sparkled, fingers itched, loaves burned, pots boiled dry, irons cooled,

churns ceased to revolve, and for a while the ordinary laws of rustic economy were suspended. As star from star, so pack differed from pack: some held nothing but the cheap enchantments of mock jewels, coloured beads, tawdry trinkets, gaudy ribbons, love-ditties whose sentiments were superior to the limitations of grammar, and survived the crudest type and coarsest paper. But in other packs there was deeper guile, more alluring wiliness; they appealed to a finer taste and a fuller stocking. They held beautiful wools, and rich silks, and exquisite laces, and gold and silver ornaments, and—but this was only for special customers whose discretion could be relied upon—a few bottles of brandy from the South coast, and a few pounds of tea from the East coast, at a price that left no doubt that they were imported under special risk and were sold as a special favour.

The wanderers came and went, and on the line of their march the flocks and herds and poultry suffered no sudden diminution. This was singular. It was yet more singular that on the right and the left, at an equal distance of about ten miles from their line of march, the poultry vanished in a startling manner; hens and cockerels with established reputations, who had never manifested any levity of disposition, or desire to gad about and wander to and fro in search of dangerous novelty—these would suddenly disappear from home, and their sad friends never more heard tidings of their whereabouts.

This was bad enough, but there was worse to follow; for in search of the errant fowl there went a colt, a gelding, or a mare, and their fate also became buried in mystery. What is one man's loss is another man's gain: by some strange chance it usually happened that the lost animals found their way to

the wanderers, who received them kindly, asked no questions, and adopted them as their own. Their new masters very thoughtfully allowed them to rest all day long in woods and hollows, in lonely lanes and out-of-the-way places; while at night they travelled quickly across country.

Once a-year the nomads from the South met, by good fortune, their brethren from the North. They were an affectionate race, and showed their delight at meeting with one another by making a wholesale exchange of their dear pets, the unfortunate animals that had come into their possession. Then each band turned on its tracks and returned home, but not by the way it had come: they were a people who liked change of scenery. It was an interesting game these wanderers were playing, albeit a little risky; the odds against them were heavy, and when one of them happened to lose, he paid his forfeit

with his life. The penalty for horse-stealing was death. But men were remarkably cheap at that time, a man's life being still appraised at five shillings.

Along the moor came the groups of Reeves at a trot. The leader of each band, mounted on horseback, rode at the head, with a string of horses behind him fastened together neck and tail; another horseman brought up the rear. At some distance from the group, one in front and the other behind, rode two men whose duty it was to detect danger and prevent surprise. After some few years of successful work, their existence as an organized band of horse-stealers had become known to the authorities, who, so far, had been unsuccessful in their endeavour to disperse or capture them. But there is an instinct in such matters; and the Reeves knew well enough that the end of, at least, their corporate existence was drawing nearer and nearer. They

were liable at any moment to find themselves face to face, not only with armed officers of the law, but with a troop of dragoons.

As a rendezvous and place of exchange, the "Bull i' th' Thorn," from its size, situation, and extensive stabling accommodation, was exactly suited to the requirements of the Reeves; while the peculiar character of its occupants was also in their favour. The Reeves came late at night and departed at daydawn, leaving hardly a trace behind them. They posted watchers to guard every approach to the house, and except from treachery and accident, they had nothing to fear. It was obviously to their advantage to be generous with Lady Poloc, and so far there had been none but honeyed words on both sides. But for several years now Poloc had kicked at the arrangement; indeed he had kicked the moment he discovered the true character of the jolly fellows, who came

and went like spirits of the night, and concerning whom his mother strictly forbade him speaking a word with any one.

After their last visit, Poloc had manifested so much obstinacy and prejudice that Lady Poloc had half promised to have nothing more to do with them. But when the time came round, seeing that her purse had fallen low, her ladyship's spirit rose high, and she received the *avant-courier* of the Reeves with defiant delight. She was glad now that Poloc was out of the way; perhaps her desire to get him out of the way had something to do with her dangerous game at poker. Her only hope just now was, that he would not return home until her company had retired for the night.

It was a full hour after the arrival of the piper before the first group of Reeves rode quietly into the grass-grown courtyard. They were part of the Northern division, and con-

sisted of six men with ten horses. Silently and quickly, lighted by a covered lantern, they stabled and fed their animals; they posted one sentinel, and then went into the house.

Another hour elapsed, and then the sentinel, who was leaning against the side of the house facing the road, gave a quick start, as out of the darkness and in the teeth of the wind—which prevented him from hearing the slightest sound of their coming—came a number of men on horseback. He was so startled that for a moment or two he saw distinctly the gleam of naked swords and the red uniform of soldiers. Then he heard a voice that he knew, and the military vision died out of his brain in a flash, and he made out dimly the less heroic figures of his friends. There were five men and seven horses in this second band, and they hailed from the South: they, also, stabled their horses, quickly and in

silence, placed a sentinel, and entered the house. Within the next half-hour there were four more arrivals. The first consisted of three men and eight horses, the second of four men and four horses, the third of seven men and twelve horses, and the fourth of two men and six horses.

Forty-seven horses were in the stables, six men were on guard, and twenty-two men were in the kitchen, including the piper. Her ladyship had, in making up her calculations, classed the piper in rough irony as only half a man ; but when she had taken the measure of his appetite, she mentally put him down as a man and a half, and went to the trouble to inform him in a half voice that he ate more than his head was worth. The night was pretty well on, when her ladyship called out from the far end of the room—

“ I'd like to know if ye're all here ? If not, how many more of your tribe d'ye look for ? ”

CHAPTER VI.

DICK O' TH' BORDER.

THE buzz of voices suddenly ceased. Then a tall big-boned man, carrying a lot of flesh, with a mild moon face, rose to his feet in the middle of the room and looked about him, with an air of quiet surprise. He was the leader of the gang, and was known as Captain Silas ; his voice was soft as butter in midsummer, his fist was like a knob of steel, his eyes were dreamy as a love-sick maiden's, and he had the reputation of a bandit.

“I think we're all here except Dick o' th' Border and Drover Tim. Do anybody

know ought o' them?" said Captain Silas, his voice sounding mild and melodious compared with her ladyship's strident tones.

For a moment or two dead silence followed the enquiry; then a man who was sitting at the massive old table under the window, eating ham and eggs, got on to his feet, and, pulling his forelock, said—

"Eea, Cap'n, aw do." He was one of the two last-comers, and his mate having lost the toss, was outside keeping guard.

"Well, York Jerry, and what is it?" enquired the Captain.

"It's a caas o' curran' cake an' slow walk-in' this time, Cap'n," answered York Jerry, rubbing the back of his hand across his mouth; then, with a touch of sentiment, he brought the back of his hand across both his eyes. A noise, half grunt and half groan, filled the room, at his words. The company seemed deeply interested, if not moved, and

all eyes were fixed upon the speaker. With a beautiful smile of simple good-nature irradiating his red face, Captain Silas put one foot on his chair, and, resting his head in his hand and his elbow on his knee, said—

“Let us know all about it, York Jerry, and dunno waste words if ye can help it.”

“Aw’ll try, Cap’n.”

“And, York Jerry, do your best to put it into English ; remembering as how th’ bulk on us are Englishmen, and dunno understand your foreign Yorkshire lingo,” explained Captain Silas, sweetly.

Left to his own dialect, York Jerry would have been equal to a graphic narrative, but the necessity of speaking “English” sadly hampered him ; he had to be attending to his tongue, and frittering away his energy on vocables, instead of devoting himself simply to his ideas and the play of his imagination.

“Aw’ll try, Cap’n,” he said, solemnly and

with a sense of sudden and overwhelming responsibility.

“Twelve neets sen we fun oursen camped for the neet in a snug hoil in a hill not a hundert miles from Lancaster. Ther were four on us—Dick o’ th’ Border, Drover Tim, misen, an’ Redcoot Mat who’s outside keepin’ gaurd now. We’d ten as gooid hosses as ta iver put e’es on. We were in a kind o’ gullet in th’ hillside, with a narrow entry an’ a caave at t’other end. We thowt it wor th’ snuggest hoil we’d iver been in, and safe as a preeson; haiver, it wornt. We sot ther at th’ maath o’ th’ caave smoakin’ an’ talkin’, when ov a suddin Drover Tim, who wor keepin’ gaurd, come rushin’ in wi’ th’ noos hot i’ th’ maath ’at th’ officers were on us. We were nawther blind nor gaumless, an’ we felt it wor a kind o’ trap we were in. We got our peestols ready, an’ our clubs. Soon ther coom a saand o’ somedy abaat th’ entry.

Cries Dick o' th' Border, 'Hallo, ther ! spaik an' say who tha art, or aw'll fire on ta.' Then a mon bawled out, 'We're constables, and we want one Richard Dearling, otherwise known as Dick o' th' Border. We have a warrant for his arrest on a charge of horse-stealing. We know how many there are of you. You are only four, and we are twelve. Resistance is useless. Surrender in the King's name !' Dick o' th' Border, wi' a laugh, 'Whear art ta, me boy ?' 'We are here outside.' 'Well, nah, coom thi ways in, an' have a smoak.' 'We are coming, with fixed bayonets.' 'Oh, aw didn't ax ta to bring th' prods along. Keep back ther ! As tha loves thisen, keep back or——' Bang ! bang ! went Dick o' th' Border's pistols, an' one o' them constable fellies gave a yell, and fell on his face, and happen he niver gate up agean. T'others drew back. Said Dick o' th' Border, loadin' his peestols, 'Boys, we're

in for fun nah.' Says aw, 'Blest if aw see mich fun in bein' cooped up in a rat-trap like this.' Says Dick o' th' Border, 'York Jerry, tha art nowt but a gurt gaumless fooil! Nubbut it's reight to add, tha fayther wor a fooil afore tha wor born.' Aw thowt a while, keepin' my tongue quiet wol aw wor primed wi' an answer; then aw remarked, 'Dick o' th' Border, tha will find it writ in Holy Bible thiswise — Birds of a feather flock together.' Aw had him ther; he wor dumb, an' ony laufed hard. Poor mon, it wor th' last bit o' Scriptur he wor iver to hear. Soon he said, 'Lads, we mun get out o' this in no time. Yo'll have to scrammel up th' chimley.' We knowed what that meant, an' Drover Tim wor a gurt fat felly. 'Awst niver get through,' he growled, pooling a faaler mug nor iver I see afore. Said Dick o' th' Border, 'Lads, awm goin' aght o' this hoil th' way aw coom in,

constables or nah constables. Th' cream-coloured mare carried me in, an' shoo'll have to carry me out. In Lundun town, shoo will bring me fifty pounds to a penny.' When he'd said soa, he gate up an' put a bridle on th' cream-coloured mare, an' a couple o' surcingles. Yo mind he wor a puny little felly, not more than five foot five, but game! Lord, but he wor game! Well, he gate under th' mare's belly, stuck his feet in one surcingle an' his hands in t'other, an' ligged reight up snug an' teet ageanst th' animal's body. 'Nah, lads,' he said, 'looase all th' hosses an' start 'em gooing like mad, two at a time, an' then mak for th' chimley; an' God help ta.' An' soa we did. Th' cream-coloured mare, wi' Dick o' th' Border sticken like glue to her belly, went aght at foo gallop. Then we took to th' chimley, Redcoat Mat first, misen next, an' Drover Tim laast. Poor felly! 'Awst niver get through,' he said, an'

he wor reight. He gate stuck in th' chimley, an' th' constables nabbed him. As for Dick o' th' Border, he wor nigh gettin' away clear, but he didna; they spied him in th' nick o' time, an' they shot him and th' mare daan deead. Aw've nowt more to tell ta, Cap'n."

York Jerry sat down and resumed operations upon the ham and eggs. The tension of his auditors was relaxed, and a sound like a great sigh—note of regret and relief—filled the room.

Captain Silas stood erect, and, addressing her ladyship, said, "We're all here, it seems, Lady Poloc." Then, with a benevolent smile upon his face and in softest tones, he said, "York Jerry, Dick o' th' Border—had he wife or children?"

"Noa, Cap'n, none."

"Drover Tim had no wife, I know; but he had a wench. Any more does anybody know?" There was no response. "A

pound apiece for Drover Tim's little wench, mates. Here's the bank," said Captain Silas, planking down a golden sovereign on the table at which he was sitting.

One by one the Reeves came forward and deposited their pound. The Captain scooped the coins into a heap, which he covered with his soft felt hat.

Then he said, "Drover Tim mustna hang for want of a lawyer's fee. And if the worst comes to the worst, he must have friends to claim his body, and a decent funeral; no cutting up by the doctors, and no body-snatching if watching will hinder it. Mates, a pound apiece for Drover Tim's legal expenses, and other—other items. Here's the bank."

Down went another sovereign, and again the Reeves came up to the scratch.

"Who's to look after the paying out of this money?" enquired the Captain.

"Cap'n Silas," came simultaneously from every throat.

"S-shh ! not so loud, mates. Captain Silas is willing, though it's a ticklish job. That's all the business just now, mates."

Captain Silas sat down, and drawing a greasy pack of cards from his waistcoat-pocket, began to shuffle them, calling in his soft way to three of his companions to come and have a rubber at whist. A strange man was this Captain Silas—mild as milk, soft as a ripe peach, gentle as a lap-dog, a total stranger to fear, wily as a panther, and in wrath or strife unrelenting and terrible : the wanderers loved him, trusted him, feared him, and obeyed him blindly.

The piper o' Pearthwick sat in a corner, on a three-cornered stool, with his back against the wall. His pipes lay on the sanded flag-paved floor beside him, within reach of his right hand. On the floor, to his left, stood a

large earthenware mug with two brown ears, filled with beer. He was smoking slowly from a long-stemmed clay-pipe, and deep speculation was in his eyes. He thought of the darkness that had almost choked him ; how it had seemed like being in a huge cave of unknown extent, that made his voice sound hollow, and drowned his words in the depth of silence. He thought of that incarnate fury of a woman, colossal in the darkness, with a voice of rasping iron, describing circles above his head with a poker. Even the redoubtable Pilcher, dog of dogs, at present jumping in his sleep under his master's seat, had surrendered for once to the spectre of terror and fled howling, leaving his master to shift for himself. Was it real, or was it only a touch of nightmare ? It seemed incredible that this was the same room, and that she was the same woman, and that he was

the same man, and that Pilcher was the same Pilcher.

The room was now a little world of heat and light and life. Rings of light from a dozen candles intersected one another and made a brilliant circular fence, covered with radiant spikes, which crowded the darkness into nooks and corners, among the heavy beams of the ceiling, behind the wooden settle by the open hearth, and into the small wide passage, out of which ran the stairs to the rooms above and the steps to the cellars below.

There were fire-dogs on the hearth, with queer-looking standards with dragons' heads and claws; but these were for ornament, not use, as the fire was built on the hearthstone. Already there was a great pile of wood-ash, the top of which was all aglow. Three or four large logs were burning merrily, hissing, crackling, shooting out red splinters into

the room, and leaping high up the wide chimney in great streaks of coloured flame, white, yellow, crimson, blue. The old paneling, dark with age, which was carried right round the room to the height of Captain Silas, caught the ruddy glare of the fire and shone warm and bright.

In addition to the heavy table, which was a fixture and ran the width of the room, and the bench beside it under the window, which was also a fixture, there was the high-backed settle on the far side of the fireplace, while three or four small round tables and a dozen rush-bottomed chairs were scattered about the room. Opposite the blazing hearth was the small fireplace of daily use, and beside it stood the empty grandfather's chair, with high back and sides and roof. This was Sir Ralph's seat, and no Reeve was disrespectful enough to occupy it. In Sir Ralph's absence, the black cat kept the seat

warm for him, and eyed Pilcher curiously. A circular salt-box hung on one side of the fireplace, and a coffee-mill on the other. Behind the settee hung a skeleton clock with a brass face, and an open pendulum that swung lazily, with a tick like the blow of a hammer. At the far end of the room was an old worm-eaten dresser, covered just now with plates, dishes, jugs, loaves of bread, part of a fitch of bacon, and the knuckle-ends of two hams; above was a rack for crockery.

Beside the dresser, on a rough wooden stand, were two small kegs of beer and an anker of brandy: in the cellar, hidden away somewhere from sight, were two like kegs of beer and an anker of brandy. These were little drink-offerings which the Reeves knew her ladyship would not despise, any more than she did a case of contraband tea.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE KING'S NAME !

THE Reevers themselves drank, not heavily but steadily ; some were thinking, some sleeping, some talking in low tones, some playing games at cards, dominoes, or draughts ; nearly all were smoking. Even the sleepers held their pipes securely between teeth or fingers. Half the dialects of England were in the room, and as many varieties of provincial costume. The men were swarthy with weather-tan, and the furrows of a hard life were cut deep into their countenances. A few of them looked vicious, but more looked simply reckless dare-devils ;

there were some that suggested nothing worse than bad luck. Looking like victims of misfortune, they awoke pity rather than anger: it is quite possible they were the biggest scoundrels of the lot. Captain Silas played three rubbers, then he rose and crossed the room and sat beside York Jerry; the two held a short conversation in a very low tone, after which the Captain got up and went to Lady Poloc, who was resting a while, leaning against the dresser, with folded arms.

“That’s sad news we’ve heard to-night, your ladyship, anent poor Dick o’ th’ Border,” remarked Captain Silas, in a sympathetic voice that seemed natural to him.

“Yes, and it’s no more than I expected. Who but a fool would go and do a thing like that?” answered Lady Poloc, sharply.

“Very sad, indeed. He was the pluckiest little chap I ever set eyes on, but he wasn’t cautious enough. Always doing something

odd and reckless. Sad, very sad. And to think he came by his death, after all, in a natural way—doing his duty and obeying orders.”

“What d’ye mean, man?”

“Well, you see, your ladyship—but this is between ourselves—I had an order from a friend of mine in London to get a mare of a certain age, size, make, and colour. He wanted it for a customer of his, who was willing to give a high price for the right animal. I promised Dick o’ th’ Border fifty pounds if he would get me the kind of animal I wanted. Three weeks ago I heard he had got it, and I sent him word to bring it through by hook or by crook. I reckon that was why he rode her out of that gullet, instead of escaping through the passage in the rocks. He was doing his duty—obeying orders. He lost his fifty pounds and his life. I’ve lost the mare and a good round sum in hard cash. Sad, very sad.”

“Happen you’ll be able to come across another animal that’ll suit you.”

“Maybe, but not likely, leastways not for some time. You don’t happen to know of one that’s likely?” enquired Captain Silas, with winning suavity.

Her ladyship laughed and said, “Why should I do your business for you? Every one to his own trade, I say.”

“And a wise saying too, your ladyship; though trades o’erlap sometimes. That’s a mighty pretty little mug you have there. Them coffee-coloured hares and yellow hounds look well,” said Captain Silas, picking up a gaily coloured mug from the dresser, and examining it with a critical air. Her ladyship nodded her head and smiled, but made no remark.

“Heavy too. Reckon it would make a good paper-weight.”

As he spoke, Captain Silas slid his thumb

and finger into his left waistcoat-pocket, and pulled out a carefully folded five-pound note. He put this on the dresser, and the mug on the top of it.

"Very sad, very sad indeed. As plucky a little chap as ever drew breath, was Dick o' th' Border," he murmured softly, as he turned away and began to refill his pipe.

Half an hour later, Captain Silas was again chatting with her ladyship beside the dresser, and it would seem that in the interval her ladyship had recognised the truth of that saying of Captain Silas—*Trades o'erlap* sometimes. Her ladyship was just remarking, "Do it? He could do it in a jiffy. Cleverest lad I ever knew with animals. There's no harm in asking him—he can't eat you. But I doubt—I reckon that's him," she said, crossing the room, as a knock was heard at the door.

"Is that you, Rafe?" she called out, with

her hand upon the heavy wooden bar across the door, in staple and slot.

“ Yes, mother.”

“ Alone ? ”

“ Alone.”

She opened the door and Poloc entered the room. A slight frown was upon his face ; it had come with his mother's last question, which reminded him unpleasantly of the character of his mother's guests. The Reevers attributed it to the sudden glare of light in which the new-comer found himself. It may seem curious, but Poloc, without doing anything to earn it, was a great favourite with the Reevers. They had a strong sense of his birth, of his rank, of his misfortunes, and also of his integrity. Her ladyship was their friend, and they admired her daring, and shrewdness in making money out of them : so far so good. But they thought the better of Sir Ralph for always making himself

scarce when they were about, and they liked young Poloc none the less for carrying himself in such a manner that none but an idiot could ever mistake him for anything else than a gentleman, and the natural—and for his mother's sake, the magnanimous—foe of all such gentry as themselves. It was this feeling that brought every Reeve to his feet as Poloc entered the room, and elicited the chorus of, "Good night, sir! Hope you're well, sir?"

Poloc returned the salutation pleasantly enough, for he was in anything but a sour humour; the Muskerry perfume was still in his nostrils. He sat down in Sir Ralph's chair for a while, before going to bed. Came Captain Silas, chair in hand, asking in mildest tones if he might be allowed to have a few words with him.

"Certainly. Sit down, Captain Silas. I shall be sorry, very sorry, when the day

comes for you to be hanged," said Poloc, a little grimly.

Captain Silas sat down, smiled reproachfully, and answered, "It's very kind of you to say so, sir; but I've a fixed notion I'm born to be drowned."

"Then it will be while trying to cross a river to escape the officers of justice. It is a silly game you are playing, to say nothing worse; and I cannot make out how a sensible man like you should take a hand in it. Risk apart, the same amount of energy put into a lawful calling would make you a rich man."

"There I think you're wrong, sir, asking your pardon. There are too many energetic fellows playing the lawful game for all, or most of them, to succeed. There isn't room for them. But in our game the field's pretty clear; competition doesn't floor a man; and a fair amount of energy is rewarded."

"With Tyburn Tree."

“Well, I’d as soon climb Tyburn Tree any day as lie starving and rotting for years in Newgate, or the Fleet, or King’s Bench Prison. That’s what your poor honest, lawful devil of debtor comes to. I’ve seen ’em, heard ’em, and shall never forget ’em. Tyburn Tree! Tyburn Tree’s a royal oak, sir, beside them cesspools!”

“All the same, I do not quite fancy a Tree that I can climb up easily enough, but cannot climb down for the life of me—or perhaps I should say, for the death of me.”

“That doesn’t scare me. Death comes but once, and once it’s bound to come. But we won’t talk any more about that, Mr Ralph; it is a grisly topic. What may be your opinion, if I may be so bold to ask, sir, anent Squire Crump’s cream-coloured mare?”

“Why? Do you want to reeve it?” asked Poloc, bluntly.

The Captain’s face assumed an injured expression.

"You're hard on a man, Mr Ralph, very hard. One would think, to hear you talk, sir, that I didn't know what it was to pay honest money for a horse," he said, in a tone of sorrowful regret.

Poloc laughed. "I confess," he said, "I thought you had an idea that horses, like blackberries, were to be gathered for nothing, and sold for what they would fetch."

"Which goes to show what victims of their prejudices the best of folk may be. I understand, sir, that the Squire's mare is a beauty."

"She is that, certainly. Handsomest bit of horse-flesh I ever put my eyes on."

"No! you don't say? And you be a good judge of horse-flesh too, I hear. Lord, how I would like just to stroke her!"

"She's a trifle fierce with strangers."

"So I've been told, sir—skittish, shy, as

hard to get nigh as a wild brood-mare. Have you ever touched her, Mr Ralph?"

"Oh yes; we are very good friends. In park or pasture she will come at my call. She is as coquettish as a beautiful woman."

"Oh, the darling! how I would like just to stroke her! How much do you think he would sell her for?"

"That is something I know nothing about. I don't know that he would sell her at all."

"Ay, but he'll have to sell her, or——"

Captain Silas suddenly paused.

"You will take her without the buying, eh?" put in Poloc.

The Captain shook his head sadly, and seemed lost in thought. Presently he said—

"I could send him what I thought the mare was worth—that wouldn't be reeving, would it?"

"Well, perhaps not; anyway, it would be an agreeable modification of the old system.

But if he doesn't want to part with her, her mere money's worth wouldn't satisfy him for her loss."

"That's mere sentiment; and in trade transactions, who pays for sentiment? Not me, sir. At any rate, I can ask him if he's willing to sell."

"Yes, that is the right way to go about it," said Poloc, rising from his seat.

"Just a word more, Mr Ralph, and I've done. If it could be managed, I should like very much just to stroke her, afore I see the Squire. You see, I want to close the bargain at once with the Squire; but I mustn't buy a pig in a poke—that's against my business principles. I want to get a private look at the animal; I should know her value in two minutes."

"Well, I daresay the groom, or coachman, or somebody about the stables, would oblige you."

Captain Silas actually sighed, as he shook his head mournfully.

"No, no, Mr Ralph, that would never do. Won't you do me a favour, Mr Ralph?" asked the Captain, with appealing persuasiveness.

"I really cannot say off-hand. Let me hear what it is."

"Won't you, as a great favour, go with me, and let us have a look at her together?"

Ralph Poloc shook his head decidedly.

"No? Ay, but I'm sorry, very sorry. But you wouldn't object just to calling the mare for me? Just to let me stroke her?"

Poloc all of a sudden seemed to grow visibly an inch taller.

"Now, now, Mr Ralph, don't be angry, sir. Her ladyship told me of the mare, and she's lost nothing by it. Nor should you either, sir, if——"

A hot flush came over Poloc's face and his

eyes kindled, at the mention of his mother's name. Looking the Captain steadily in the eye, he said, in a tone that admitted of no doubt as to his meaning—

“Captain Silas, you have had communications, it seems, with my mother, and you have made a proposal to me just now. Evil communications are apt to corrupt good manners and good morality. All I have to say is this: the next time you dare to do what you have done to-night, I'll kick you out of this house as sure as you are a living man. You are as brave as you are big, I know, and as big as you are bad; but what Ralph Poloc says he will do, he will do. Good night to you.”

“Yes, yes, there's no doubt on it; he'd do it. Sad, very sad that a fine young fellow like that should have such a temper, and so many prejudices!” murmured Captain Silas to himself, as he watched Poloc

pick up a candle and go up-stairs to bed. There was no resentment in the large breast of Captain Silas, only a fine blending of pity and admiration.

Poloc went to bed, and for a time lay thinking of Guenilda; then the Reeves took possession of his thoughts, and banished the fairer image from his mind altogether. By-and-by he laughed audibly, and throwing back the bed-clothes, sprang lightly on to the floor, and began to dress himself. Picking up his shoes in his hand, he opened a door that had not been unbolted for a twelve-month, and went lightly in his stockings along a broad landing, and down a narrow zigzag corridor that was as dark as a bag. At the end of the corridor was a short flight of steps, and at the bottom of these was a window, fastened with a single shutter and cross-bar.

Poloc gently lowered the bar and opened

the shutter: the window consisted of two iron bars fixed perpendicularly in the stonework, and nothing else. Wood-work and glass had altogether disappeared. A cold wind drave in the face of Poloc. After a moment's hesitation, he passed through the bars, and dropped noiselessly on to the roof of the granary, where he sat down in a small wilderness of weeds and wild-flowers and put on his shoes. From the granary roof he passed to an apple-tree, from the tree on to a brick kennel with steps, and so into the courtyard.

The wind had increased in strength, and was now blowing half a gale. Driven maybe by the wind, the six Reevers who were mounting guard had come together in groups of threes, and were sheltering at two different points under the lee of the out-buildings: this was altogether a better arrangement, they thought, than standing

fifty feet apart from each other, solitary and shivering with cold. Meanwhile, however, a battle might have raged in the courtyard without them hearing a sound.

Poloc, having satisfied himself that he had nothing to fear from the picquet, came to the kitchen-door and thundered upon it loudly with a clump of wood he had in his hand. The low murmur of voices within suddenly ceased, and for some moments a dead silence reigned. Then he heard his mother's voice calling out—

“Who's there, ye noisy wretch?”

“Open the door, or I will break it open,” Poloc answered, in the most foreign tones he could command. There was no reply for some little time, and Poloc began to wonder if his voice had been recognized. It was with no small relief that he heard her ladyship at length call out—

“Ye will, will ye, ye murderous vagabond!

Break open my door and I'll break open your knavish head! Ei, and I will, if ye be King George himself!"

Poloc gave another loud knock, and then he cried—

"Open, in the King's name!"

At this there seemed to be a quick shuffling of feet, followed by another brief spell of silence. Then was heard the mild voice of Captain Silas observing—

"We are all good and true subjects of his Majesty King George III. here, and it would pain us to dispute his authority. But you see, good sir, this house is lonesome, and the night is wild, and there are bad men abroad who would not hesitate to take the Royal name in vain, if thereby they could steal our purses, and, peradventure, cut our throats. Therefore, good sir, I pray you have me and my two companions excused from opening the door."

“Open, in the King's name!”

“I am sorry, very sorry, but I can't do it. May I be so bold as to enquire your name?”

“Captain Lupton, of the Scots Greys.”

“You don't say! Then I know you, Captain, and where you are stationed. You've not ridden from barracks to-night, I hope?”

As no reply came, he continued—

“Not talkative to-night, eh, Captain? Well, well, it grieves me to keep you out in the cold, but—what's your business?”

“To capture, alive or dead, you, Captain Silas, and your gang.”

“Well, to be sure, that's a bit of pleasing information. And how do you mean to work it?”

“I have here a troop of dragoons. Your outposts are already captured, all six of them. The ‘Bull i' th' Thorn’ is sur-

rounded, and escape is out of the question. I command you to surrender, in the King's name."

"Well, I'm sorry, mighty sorry. You seem to have been sharpening your wits lately, unless it be that it's the work of a traitor. I'm Captain Silas—that's dead sure—and the boys are all here. We'll fight you, Captain Lupton—fight you just as long as body and soul hang together. But there is not a man among us as knows what 'surrender' means, and I'm thinking, Captain, it's beyond your power to teach 'em. Good night, Captain; I'm going to have a glass o' grog afore the business begins."

Poloc heard him coolly walk away and call for a glass of grog.

Five minutes later Poloc descended from his bedroom to the kitchen; he was not more than half dressed, and what with his nightcap on his head, and the wild half-

dazed look in his sleepy eyes, and the flaming of the candle, that had burnt so low that the paper round the end had caught fire, he presented a rather singular appearance.

“What d’ye want here now, Rafe? Why aren’t ye asleep in bed?” demanded her ladyship, angrily.

“I came to see what that loud knocking meant just now. What’s all this mean? What’s the matter?” said Poloc, with some show of concern, as his glance went round the room. The Reeves stood grouped together, armed with pistols and clubs. Came Captain Silas, with a smile on his moon face, and said—

“We are in a bit of a fix, Mr Ralph, that’s all. There’s a troop of cavalry outside, and they want to come in. Happen they’ll come to, for the matter of that. How they got scent on us is what bothers me,

unless it's the — the — work — of — a — a — Traitor, Mr Ralph."

The beautiful smile still lingered like sunshine on his face, but somehow it did not qualify his voice, which was dark, cold, and dangerous. At the word "traitor" every eye was fixed on Poloc; then, as the same idea seemed to flash suddenly from mind to mind, a hoarse shout went up of "Traitor! Death to the traitor!"

Poloc felt a strange clutching at his heart; his joke seemed about to recoil in boomerang fashion upon his own head. Leaning against the dresser with folded arms, Lady Poloc watched the scene with an air of supreme indifference. Said Captain Silas—

"If I say the word, sir, you're a dead man in twenty seconds. That's what I call having the power of life and death in your hands. I should be sorry, very sorry, sir, to make a mistake, seeing as how I can kill, but canna

make alive again. You may as well own up, sir, afore I say the word."

"You can say what word you like, as far as I'm concerned, Captain Silas. But the first man as tells me I am a traitor is a liar, and I'll punch his head for him whether his name is Captain Silas or not," replied Poloc, with no pretence of sleep in his eyes now.

Captain Silas said, turning to his men—

"You hear him, lads, and you see him—nightcap and all. Now, who wants his head punched?"

At this the Reeves broke out laughing.

"None of you, it seems. Nor do I, lads. As for Mr Ralph being a traitor—well, never mind what I thought or feared. One thing is dead sure—Ralph Poloc is a gentleman, and he says it's a lie. I'm thinking if any of you don't believe him, you had better step

out one at a time, and he'll give you a jolly good punching—and serve you right ! ”

Said York Jerry — “ If we wornt in sich a teet hoil, an' had th' teem, aw'd like a bout at wrestlin' wi' Meester Rafe ; nobbut aw'd be ashamed to say aw didna believe ta, sir.”

Said Poloc to Captain Silas—“ Well, and what are you going to do next to amuse yourselves with ? ”

“ Seeing we haven't got to kill you, sir, we can do nothing but wait till they attack us. There will be plenty of amusement then, happen,” answered Captain Silas, a bit grimly.

“ Why don't you try and get away ? You will be shot or hanged, as sure as fate, if you stay here.”

“ Very likely ; but, as York Jerry says, we are in ‘ sich a teet hoil.’ The vermin are all round the house, it seems.”

"I think I know a way out, if you care to trust me," said Poloc, a little loftily.

For an answer, Captain Silas turned to the Reeves, and said, "Now, lads, pick up your traps, keep your pistols ready, sharpen your wits, and follow me. I'm going to follow this gentleman who wanted to punch your heads."

So they started in single file, and in another minute the kitchen was deserted. Poloc led them through a series of vault-like cellars, till he came to a pile of old casks; removing several of these, he felt in the dry dust with his hand for some moments, until he had found an iron ring. "Lend me a hand, Captain," he said, and together they raised a large trap-door that had not been lifted for years. A short flight of steps, a long bricked passage, in which Dick o' th' Border could have stood upright, and then an iron door, bolted and barred,

which was difficult to open. At last it swung with a creak, and the wind came driving in. They forced their way through a thick growth of thorns and brambles, and then they stood free, in a little hollow between the "Bull i' th' Thorn" and the village.

At a word from Captain Silas, the men separated as noiselessly as phantoms, and were at once swallowed up in the moorland darkness. Half an hour later, after reconnoitring with vulpine sagacity and precaution, the Reevers were all gathered together again in the courtyard of the "Bull i' th' Thorn." Said Captain Silas—

"There's something at the back of this I don't understand. Happen it was only a trick; in which case, I'd very much like to know who played it on. Happen, though, we aren't yet out of the woods. I am inclined to think we shall fall in with our

friends before sunrise, and then we shall have our hands full. The thing to do now, lads, is to thank our lucky stars, get our animals out, and each of us gang our own gate with the best foot forrard. Between me and the 'Bull i' th' Thorn' there'll lie fifty miles afore this time to-morrow."

And very soon afterwards men and horses were travelling across the moor swiftly, in a dozen different directions. Unseen by the Reeves, Poloc watched the last of them depart, and then he re-entered the house. Lady Poloc was warming her feet in front of the open fireplace, candle in hand, ready to retire.

"Are you going to bed, mother?" asked Poloc.

"I be," answered her ladyship rather tartly.

"What about the soldiers outside?"

“ Look here, Rafe, I'm none such a fool as you think for. Happen ye think it was a very good joke, and I'm precious glad to be well rid of 'em. But if they'd done for ye, it would have served you just right. Not know thy voice, lad ? Fiddlesticks ! ” And her ladyship marched off to bed, leaving Poloc to his own reflections.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE "LEATHER BOTTLE."

THE "Leather Bottle" inn, as if conscious that it had more than a merely local reputation to sustain—the fame of its cleanliness, comfort, prettiness, politeness, its nut-brown draughts of home-brewed ale, and its proximity to the classic Scarthin, from which grayling could be landed in a hot sun and trout in the clear moonlight, having been bruited abroad the land unto the margin of the four seas—was withdrawn from the swarm of cottages, and stood in dignified aloofness at the upper end of the village of Poloc. It was one mass of ivy from cellar-

window to chimney-top, and was flanked on the side nearest to the village by an old-fashioned garden, behind a carefully trimmed yew hedge with a back almost broad enough and strong enough for a coach-and-four. Pleasant exceedingly to the eye was this garden, with its honeysuckled arbours, its quaint seats of retirement among the rocks, and nooks of observation in the trees. The ear also was fed therein with the babble of a brook, melodious as the chatter of a young child, and, in the right season, with the droning of bees and the twittering and singing of birds.

In front of the house was an ancient yew, with a wooden seat around it; hard by was a drinking-trough for horses. In summer time it was as pretty a roadside inn as any the mail-coaches drew up at, or thundered past at an average rate of eight miles an hour including stoppages, between Man-

chester, or Liverpool, and the Swan with Two Necks, Lad Lane, in London Town. And though to the seeing eye and the hearing ear its winter charm was not less strong than its summer charm, to ordinary mortals the attraction was all inside the "Leather Bottle," at what time the crisp red-brown leaves of the beech-trees rattled like bits of tissue-paper in the wind.

The common drinking was not done at the "Leather Bottle," but in the ale-house at the other end of the village known as the "Up Three Steps" inn; thither resorted the commonalty of Poloc, who were entertained in the kitchen. The parlour was reserved for the use of the *magnates y poderosos*, the more important personages of the place, among whom were reckoned a small farmer or two, the parish clerk, the keeper of the village shop, the blacksmith, and a few others.

But when these great people entered the "Leather Bottle," they had to moderate their pretensions, and lower their dignity to the level of the flag-paved kitchen, with its rows of pewter plates and copper saucepans, its hanging hams, and flitches of bacon, some drying in the chimney-corner and others lying in flat racks near the ceiling. And this they did without any heartburning or friction, knowing like reasonable men that, though sheep may take precedence of poultry, they may not exalt themselves in presence of the big cattle of the field, like unto horses and oxen.

Even the miller, who was a warm man and ran his own mill, and the timber merchant, and the Squire's agent, and Mr Doxey the big farmer, recognized the propriety of turning into the kitchen, if any foreign gentleman with a taste for fishing happened to be in the parlour. Their sense of propriety was so ad-

mirable, that if they happened to be in the parlour when young Mr Poloc, or young Mr Crump, or young Mr Muskerri entered, they would at once get up, and, with a respectful greeting, leave the place of honour to the new-comer and proceed to the kitchen. Though if any of the gentlemen detained them with questions, and seemed to desire to have a talk with them, they were ready to show their good-breeding by their consent.

Let us take just a peep at this place of high honour—the parlour at the "Leather Bottle" inn. A good-sized room, but not too large to be thoroughly warmed by the cheerful wood-fire; low-roofed, with two ponderous beams, black as ebony, dropping six inches below the ceiling. The floor of bright-red tiles nicely sanded with fine silvery sand; the broad lattice-window with deep embrasures, wherein is placed a pot of lavender. The walls lined all over with

wainscoting dark with age, and ornamented with a picture of the king arrayed in the familiar blue coat, star, cocked-hat, and top-boots; two piscatorial pieces,—one showing a carp and a tench lying side by side in death, with a curious expression of wonder in their open eyes—the other a landscape view of distant mountains, with a nearer lake, and in the foreground a char, or Alpine trout, with an olive-green back and a vermilion belly; a dozen or so patriotic handbills and soul-stirring ballads pinned here and there, reminiscences of the thrill of fear and defiance that four or five years earlier had run through all England, and the memory of which still made all England's blood to tingle.

Opposite the window, an old engraving of Izaak Walton with crossed hands, ring on the third finger of the sinister hand, gloves in the same hand, broad collar round the

neck, three rows of buttons down his coat, wearing his own hair on to his shoulders, and with more of the Puritan than the Prelatist in his countenance. Underneath the engraving, in a little glazed frame, a faded bit of writing to this effect—*In this chair sat Mr Izaak Walton when he came a-fishing to Poloc in the month of November A.D. MDCLIII., and stayed at the old house with the sign of the Leather Bottle.* Below the legend, the chair itself, high-backed, broad-bottomed, four mast-like legs, a couple of turned rails on each of the four sides, two more for the arms, and six at the back, three vertical and three horizontal—twin brother to Governor Carver's chair; not a thing of beauty like the Elder Brewster chair, but made at a time when timber was sound and well seasoned, and chairmakers had not as yet taken to the curious study of spiders' legs. On the high and narrow mantelpiece,

an array of brass candlesticks of simple antique pattern. Half-a-dozen well-polished Windsor chairs, a square mahogany table with folding-leaves, a small round table with moveable top near the window, and between the door and the open fireplace a huge screen with many folds.

Such was the parlour at the "Leather Bottle" inn, with something more that was not to be described but experienced—the spirit of welcome, the sense of comfort, the flavour of a ripe and sound old age.

In this room, all alone, sat young Percival Muskerrey, one white November day about a fortnight later than the coming and the going of the Reeves. He had found it heavy walking, owing to the deep fall of snow during the previous night; and finding himself overtaken by another snowstorm in the neighbourhood of the "Leather Bottle," he had turned in for shelter, and now was reading a London

paper two days old. He was perfectly familiar with the room, and felt quite at home in the large arm-chair—not Mr Izaak Walton's, which was for ornament, not use—with its chintz-covered cushion and broad flat arms; for the place was the village substitute for White's, where he and his friend, Archibald Crump, often met and had a glass and pipe together, talked politics local and imperial, discussed the general prospects of the war and the details of the latest victory, or played a close game at chess. Not infrequently, of late especially, they had been joined by Poloc. It was Crump who had introduced Poloc to Muskerriy, and the two had learned to like each other cordially; so much was this the case, that Crump had more than once shown signs of jealousy.

Since the time when they were lads of much the same age, Crump had always

cultivated the society of the last of the proud Polocs. His mode of cultivation was hardly a happy one, however. He seemed to start with the idea that his acquaintance was an honour which invited, not to say demanded, a certain deference on the part of the recipient. A Poloc deferential to a Crump ! Poloc did not see the matter at all in that light, and when any attempt was made at patronage, he had the irritating trick of turning the tables upon his companion, and touching him with a light insolence and ridicule, that sometimes stung like a nettle and again pricked like a thorn. This was not exactly the method of friendship.

Nevertheless, so far as it went, Poloc was loyal in his companionship, and his word never outran his heart. This was scarcely the case with Crump. Perhaps it was only natural that he should be a bit ruffled at the

frank footing of perfect equality on which Muskerry and Poloc stood in fifteen minutes after their first introduction ; at the strange ease with which they seemed to reach an entire understanding of one another. More especially as he, Crump, had always felt that there was a subtile barrier between himself and Muskerry which the latter absolutely refused to help him break down.

Again, as human nature goes, it was questionless a little vexing, not to say galling, to compare the formal respect which he, the Squire's son, extorted from the villagers with the instinctive and affectionate deference which they seemed proud to offer Ralph Poloc, ploughman and mule-driver. But though these were real grievances, they could be scarcely said to reach to the justification of double-face and backbiting—little foibles in which Archibald Crump was apt to indulge. Just now he was in London, where

he had been for several weeks ; and Muskerri, cast on his own resources, had found them scarcely equal to the pleasant destruction of time.

The paper he was scanning suggested London, which suggested sundry delightful phases of life, which suggested his friend Crump, which suggested Crump's return, which suggested the royal mail-coach. He paid out this chain of ideas with no peasant's sluggishness, but leisurely and deliberately, with a full consciousness that as it was with pounds sterling, so it was with mental images and ideas—an extravagant expenditure would entail a speedy bankruptcy.

The intellectual pace of provincial life on both sides of the Scarthin, whether in hall or cottage, bore no resemblance to the desperate and dangerous speed of the mail-coach which, to sober-minded people, was

objectionable, and revolutionary in tendency. Nor yet did it resemble the speed of the ordinary stage-coach, whose foolish ambition to run neck to neck with the royal mail was only checked and broken by its superior weight and its inferior horse-flesh. Rather did it resemble the huge stage-waggon with its mighty tent, its eight powerful horses, its broad massive wheels with five tires attached to each periphery; slowly it moved and surely, with no revolutionary recklessness, leaving a well-defined track behind it, and with a ponderous dignity all its own.

Paying out ideas in this leisured manner, it took Muskerry to the end of his clean clay-pipe, with a stem a yard in length and curled in the middle for the space of six inches, to reach the image of the mail-coach. Apparently this was the last link of the concatenation of ideas, for upon its arrival Muskerry came out of his abstraction, and

cast a glance at the weather through the window. Then he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, having first thrown the stale newspaper across the room.

A tap on the door, and the motherly figure of Dame Wildgoose, the hostess, appeared.

"I thought the fire happen wanted tending a bit, sir," she said, proceeding to add a couple more logs to the ample fire.

"It is still snowing, I see," remarked Muskerrey.

"Yes, sir; and there's more to come yet, I'm thinking."

"It will be pretty heavy travelling, then."

"You are right there, sir. The outsides will have a poor time of it."

"I think, as I have stayed so long, I will stay a little longer till the mail has gone. It should be here soon, if it isn't late," said Muskerrey, pulling his watch out of his fob.

"And what may the time be now, sir, if you please?"

"Ten minutes to two."

"Then it won't be here for twenty-five minutes yet."

"Is it always punctual, then?" asked Muskerry, with a pleasant laugh.

"Well, no, sir, not alles, but mostly. It's been late twice this year so far. Tenth o' Jannywery, it was nine minutes behind time; snow caused it. Twenty-second o' July, it was welly half an hour late, 'cause they lost a linchpin—near hind wheel, I think it was,—and come welly nigh having a turn-over. Happen they'll have six horses in to-day; but barring accidents, they'll be here to time, sir, you may depend on it," said Dame Wildgoose, with a certainty of conviction that would have been ridiculous had it not been sublime.

We are apt to think that railways inaugu-

rated the era of punctuality in travelling ; yet it is on record that two mails, starting at the same time from points six hundred miles apart, met regularly on a certain bridge, which stood half-way on their journey. Dame Wildgoose's faith in a system that was daily illustrated by similar facts, was as much a compliment to her own good sense as it was to the wonderful organization that evoked and justified it.

"Then, bring me some egg-flip, please," said Muskerry, refilling his pipe.

The egg-flip was brought and disposed of, and Muskerry was half-way through his second pipe, when the winding blast of a horn was heard at a little distance. He looked at his watch.

"Quarter past two. Pretty prompt that," he murmured.

He sat listening, and very soon he heard a dull thud, which seemed suddenly to open

out into a rattling series of sharp strokes, followed by the crunching of wheels and the thunder of hoofs. Dropping his pipe, Muskerri rushed to the door and stood under the porch, to watch the passing of the royal mail. Dame Wildgoose stood beside him, with a couple of maids behind craning their necks to get a good view, while out in the snow, in sleeved waistcoat that had once been red but was now subdued by the dyes of the stable-yard, stood the ostler with an admirably assumed air of expectancy, as though it were an everyday occurrence for the "Leather Bottle" to receive guests by the royal mail-coach. Another blast on the horn, and round the near curve in the road comes dashing into view the coach.

Dame Wildgoose was right—there are six horses to-day, with a postilion on the near leader; they are sweating and foam-flecked, but they are in splendid form and their

mettle is high, and they come on with tossing heads at a swinging gallop. The blood tingles in Muskerry's veins, and had he been alone by the roadside he would have cried, Hurrah! hurrah! On it comes at full speed. In two seconds it will have passed, and gone thundering up the valley. "Whoa!" cries the driver, gathering in his reins, while the wheels creak and grow suddenly bright with the pressure of the brakes. The horses make a dead stop instantly; and the glorious spectacle, instead of rushing away like a vision, is halted right facing the front door of the "Leather Bottle."

Instantly, there is a flutter of excitement among the females. Dame Wildgoose raises her hands as high as her breasts, with a subdued, "Lors bless me!" Then, calling to mind her station and duties as hostess, she turns to the maids and says, almost sharply, "Now, girls, look alive!" Whereupon the

maids dart away into the house. The ostler has sprung forward and stands in willing and waiting attitude behind the nimble guard, who has dropped from his perch in a flash, and obsequiously touches his hat as he opens the door to allow one of the four insides to alight. This is a gentleman of medium height, wearing a hat with a conical crown, and a long drab overcoat bordered with fur. He looks about him for a moment, then a frown gathers on his face, and in haughty tones he calls out, loudly enough for his travelling companions to hear—

“Ostler, what the devil does this mean? Hasn’t the carriage come from the Hall?”

“No, sir; nowt’s come, Mr Archibald.”

Then, raising his voice,—he is a great diplomatist in a small way,—he adds—

“I see’d your father, the Squire, sir, out in the yeller-bodied carriage not long sen; he was a-driving the two chestnuts, sir, an’ I

thowt they looked nicer than the greys, sir. Happen, he reckoned o' being round in time to drive you up, sir."

His face is grave, but he is chuckling inside ; for if his bit of neat fiction has not won him half-a-crown from Mr Archibald, then he is a duffer that does not know the market-price of the feather that tickles vanity.

"Very likely. I will—— Hallo, old man, this is jolly!" exclaims the traveller from town, as Muskerry, smiling at his own thoughts, lounges gracefully across the road.

"First-rate. Didn't expect you a bit. Glad to see you. Come inside and give me the news," says Muskerry, who is more pleased to see his companion than he cares to show. With his blond, fresh, frank face, his easy carriage, arrayed in a loose jacket, breeches, and top-boots, he looks the country gentleman every inch.

Meanwhile the nimble maids of the inn have presented jarvey and guard and postilion with draughts of the very best tap in the house, and have served tankards to order to the three outsides, and two brandies and a whisky to order to the three insides. The luggage is out, the guard has mounted to his seat, and while Mr Archibald Crump is rather ostentatiously taking leave of coachman and guard in the time-honoured silvery way, we may steal a quick glance at the splendid horses, the beautiful shape of the chocolate-coloured vehicle, with the royal arms emblazoned modestly upon a single panel.

Jarvey is in the privilege of the post-office, and wears the royal livery; but, alas! all glory of colour is hidden, for driver and guard are enveloped in thick overcoats with innumerable capes. "Steady there! and forrard's the word. Gee up!" cries the coach-

man. The postilion lifts his whip, the horses spring forward like greyhounds, the guard blows a blast on the horn, and away goes the royal mail at a gallop which will soon make up the four minutes lost at the "Leather Bottle."

CHAPTER IX.

A QUESTION OF COLOURS.

THE ostler set about getting a horse and cart ready to take the luggage up to the Hall—Poloc Hall, as it was still called, the ancestral home of the Polocs, whose arms were built into the walls in a dozen places. In the classic parlour the two young men were chatting over their pipes.

“Why didn’t you let me know you were coming down? I didn’t expect you much before Christmas,” said Muskerry.

“Well, the truth is, I left a bit suddenly. I hadn’t even time to let them know at home that I was coming.”

“Then how on earth did you expect them to meet you?”

“Meet me? Oh, you are thinking of me asking about the carriage not being here. Oh, that was a bit of brag. There were two big swells inside there, you know, and I thought I'd let them see—— But there, I believe they were only raffs, after all,” exclaimed Crump, with a laugh in which Muskerri did not join.

Continued Crump—“The fact of the matter is, I have been going it a little too fast. Night before last, I got playing at hazard with Lord Tom Hallowynd and a deucedly lucky little Frenchman, Count de—de—call it de Devil. He was attached to the French Embassy some time ago, and is now a great curser of Bonaparte. Between them, they cleared me out completely. I thought I'd better get away before I plunged deeper. The old man is willing to pay for my 'legiti-

mate pleasures taken in aristocratic society,' as he put it. Unfortunately, however, he does not consider losing from three to five hundred a night at hazard or *écarté* a legitimate pleasure, not even if I lose to pretty Mrs Mashington, or lovely Lady Pilton, or Lord Tom, or the De Devil himself."

"I wish my governor would stump up as well as yours does. It is horribly dull down here just now."

"There is no life here,—absolutely none. It is vegetation and nothing else, except—minerals," remarked Crump.

"I would not go so far as that. You wouldn't call a torpid bat a fungus, or a hibernating bear a stone. We want waking up, that's all. Did you go to the opera?"

"Yes. We had *Così Fan tutti*, or *Soglia Degli Amanti*; music by Mozart—a stupid composition. Vestris, Deshayes, and his dear corpulent lady, danced *à ravir*. You should

have seen her. It was enough to make an ox grow sentimental. With majestic slowness she elevated her proud limb until it was in a perfectly horizontal position, at right angles with the other leg; then, on the point of her toes, she described a beautiful circle in the air, with outstretched finger on a line with her leg. It was a *tour de force* that brought the house down. It would have been divine if—her waist had measured ten inches less.”

In this style he rattled on for nearly an hour. He had a lot to tell, and liked the telling of it, and had a most appreciative listener in Muskerry, whose visits to town were not so frequent as he would have liked, and could scarcely be said to keep him in touch with the great world of London life. The O.P. Riots were just ended, and the stupid episode had furnished Crump with a full sheaf of racy anecdotes. He bewailed

his bad luck in not having heard the strong, sweet voice, nor seen the winsome action, nor the bewitching tenderness of expression of the Italian "antelope face" of Catalani, who had gone to Ireland. He had heard the comic Naldi, and the graceful Tramezzani, and Bianchi, and Bertinotti, and the trumpet-toned Braham. At Covent Garden he had seen the mighty Kemble in "Hamlet," with Munden's Polonius and Fawcett's Gravedigger. Besides coat and waistcoat, he had counted eight under-waistcoats which the chief gravedigger took off one at a time, and, folding carefully, put beside his coat with pantomimic variety and detail of action which made the house ring with applause at this bit of faithful copying from nature.

He had seen Elliston in a "A Cure for the Heart-Ache" at the Haymarket, and in the "Honeymoon," and thought his love-making the very finest thing going. He had some-

thing to say of the tragic Siddons, and jolly Bannister, and the mimic Mathews; while his praise of Mrs Jordan ran high and strong as the Scarthin at flood-time. He had been introduced to her, and had shaken hands with her.

Pidcock's Menagerie, alas! he reported defunct; but it was some consolation at least to know what the skeleton of the elephant was put up at, and what it was knocked down at. He had seen the wonderful performing horses at Astley's; and West's famous picture of the Death of Nelson; and Parker's great panorama of Dover, covering a surface of nine hundred square yards; and that cabinet of natural history known as the Liverpool Museum, wherein was the enormous boa-constrictor, which threw a strange light on the old story of Laocoon, seeing that it was as thick as a man's thigh, and could crush a deer to

death; also, in the very next box at the Haymarket, he had had pointed out to him the pale face and *nares acutissimæ* of Mr Canning.

As ever, there were *deux mondes* in London, *le beau et le demi*; and it was not to be expected that a person of Mr Archibald Crump's agility of fancy and eager curiosity should rest content with the open shows of the recognised world, and not seek to explore the strange delights, and perilous mysteries, and deadly charms of the world that lay in mock concealment, and pretended disguise, and artificial shade, looking askance and laughing slyly, like a sun-clad nymph peeping through the leaves of the trees, at the portentous make-believe, and solemn comedy of moral pretence and affected ignorance, enacted over the hedge on the common highway of the world proper. No need was there to leap the hedge, for gaps

abounded, some insolently open, and more artfully masked. So Crump passed through and entered the shady world, and saw the sun-clad nymph with the mocking laugh ; and looking back to see whereat she laughed, he saw the jest on the other side of the hedge—the solemn comedy—and he laughed also.

He was in the middle of an entertaining narrative of some adventures he had had in this department of life, when he was interrupted by Muskerry exclaiming, as he rose and went to the window—

“ Hold on ! There goes Poloc, I think.”

Crump was not well pleased at the interruption, but concluding that two auditors were better than one for such a choice passage in his experience, he merely remarked—

“ You had better call him in.”

Muskerry, however, made no signal, but stood a little distance from the window, as though he wished to see without being seen.

His hands were in his pockets, and soon he began to whistle.

“ Well, what’s up ? ” enquired Crump, his ever-alert curiosity already a-tiptoe.

“ Come and see,” answered Muskerrey.

Crump stepped to the window, and this was what he saw. About a hundred yards down the road was Ralph Poloc in his rough, patched, workaday suit. From the couple of flour-sacks on his left arm, it seemed probable that he was on his way to the mill, that stood in the wood some little distance ahead. Coming towards him with the step of a fawn was a tall young lady, enveloped in a dark-coloured pelisse trimmed with ermine, and wearing a Gainsborough hat.

“ Who is she ? Why, it is——”

“ Our Guen. Been for a constitutional, it seems. I think I will walk with her home. I didn’t know she knew—— Well, well, well ! ”

And Mr Percival Muskerrey began to whistle, and danced a few steps of the hornpipe. For it was still snowing, and the road was quite deserted except for the man and the maid; and when they met, instead of Poloc stepping aside, out of the beaten trail in the snow, to allow the lady to pass, having saluted her with raised hat, he stood his ground, and, first throwing a glance over his shoulder, took her hand—which she gave with seeming readiness—and not only shook it, but held it in his own full twenty seconds longer than need was. Then, instead of coming on homewards, the lady faced round and accompanied Poloc towards the mill. This it was that induced Mr Percival Muskerrey to foot it nimbly.

His companion, with face glued to the window-pane, watched the retreating couple until they rounded the curve in the road,

which hid them from view. Then he drew back into the room, and addressed Muskerri with—

“Well, if that isn’t something more than a joke, I’ll be hanged! What do you make of it?”

“A clever hand could make anything of it, but not me. I’m not clever enough by half. I am inclined to fancy, though, that the chief question is, What will they make of it?”

“It is outrageous, scandalous, infamous!” cried Crump, his deep-set black eyes, overshadowed by thick black eyebrows that were now crumpled by a heavy frown into a single line of forbidding aspect, gleaming in their deep sockets like the eyes of an enraged bear.

“You seem to take it badly, old man. What is the trouble?” enquired Muskerri.

“A fellow like him! A ploughman! A mule-driver! By heaven! if she were my

relative, I would horsewhip him for his insolence."

Muskerry gave a light whistle that might have meant a dozen things, ere he answered, "'Ploughman' is fair enough and true enough; but 'mule-driver,' that's below the belt. And whatever he is in the line of occupation, confound it, in the line of birth, you know, Crump, he's a Proud Poloc. As for the horsewhip—well, I hope I am not a coward, but if it should suddenly change hands, as it most likely would in a scuffle, the whipping would probably all fall to my share. After all, why should I have a finger in the pie?"

This was said with such a lightness of tone and air of irresponsibility, that Crump instinctively felt that it would be slightly ridiculous in him to roll any more huge billows of indignation, so long as the lady's kinsman, who stood to her in a brother's

stead, thought that a half-inch hose would meet the occasion. Accordingly, though his anger was still hot, his tone was less tragic when he said—

“That is all very well; but the thing ought to be put a stop to. Your father, who is her natural and legal guardian, at least ought to know about it.”

“Then you had better tell him, since you seem to take such an interest in her welfare. Though I am afraid it is all thrown away on her.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Crump, shooting a keen glance at his companion.

“Nothing, except that she is her own mistress, and she knows it. And I don’t feel that she would thank either of us for meddling with what doesn’t concern us. Come to that, there is nothing to it. A mere whim of hers, or at worst a bit of a flirtation.”

But this failed to mollify Crump. He glunched and gloomed and spat out some hot oaths.

"I hate a fellow to be so green," he exclaimed, almost savagely.

"As far as colours go, I prefer green to yellow any day; and you are like a buttercup. To-morrow you will have a fit of the blues. The united colours will then form a degree of greenness peculiar to some conditions of youth, and always an interesting study to superior persons, like myself."

To which Crump made no reply, but sat glaring at the fire for some minutes in silence.

"I would give something to know how long this has been going on," he said, at length.

"I don't know, but I should guess some time, from the way in which he held her hand," said Muskerrey, laughing.

Crump saw nothing in Poloc's conduct to laugh at, but, on the contrary, he condemned him in abbreviated Latin.

"Within the last three months, I have met him twice within half a mile of our place. And I am inclined to think I passed him one night, not long since, close to the shrubbery. It was dark at the time, and I did not recognize his voice, but it was his figure, now I think of it."

Muskerry seemed to take a wicked pleasure in recalling these incidents, and he looked at Crump with an amused expression to see their effect upon him. Their glances met, and Crump read the peculiar anxiety that was written, without any attempt at concealment, on his companion's face. He smiled grimly, and remarked with an oracular air—

"Ah, well, we shall see what we shall see."

A little later, Guenilda Muskerry went

by, evidently oppressed with no sense of sin or shame, judging from her free, graceful carriage. They both saw her, and her cousin rose to his feet, lazily, and said—

“I suppose it is my duty to see her safely home in these days of danger and temptation. Happen she will have another gentleman of the plough awaiting her the other end of the village. Glad you are back again, old man. Good-day.”

“Good-day, my philosopher. Don't forget to lock the stable-door as soon as you find out the mare's stolen!” called out Crump, as Muskerry stood for a second under the porch, turning up his coat-collar. There runs a knowing proverb that, *Debajo de ruin capa yace buen bebedor*—Under a shabby cloak may be found a good drinker; the corollary being that a heavy countenance may conceal a light heart. Crump's heart was certainly not sad, though his face was

anything but merry, as he drew a chair near to the window and kept his glance down the road.

The advantages of having a father, rich and liberal with his money, are obvious to every young fellow who is not a blockhead. Crump, who was no blockhead, had such a father; nevertheless, uppermost in Crump's mind just now was the terrible disadvantage under which he laboured in having such a father. He was not thinking now of stearin, palmitin, and olein; nor of the many difficulties his respected parent found in dealing, as a squire should, with the king's English; nor yet of sundry mannerisms and habitudes that were a little foreign to young Oxford's ideal of the country gentleman. These merited and received a frequent and painful consideration; but at the present moment the theme of discontent was of a different nature.

The elder Crump was one of that—let us hope old-fashioned—breed of sires who thought that their own career was a sufficiently good model to be copied by their offspring, with slavish fidelity. As it happened, he was just turned twenty-two when he first fell in love, and he married when he was twenty-five; and these two accidents he had the audacity to exalt into acts of deliberate and consummate wisdom. This was bad enough, in all truth, but he proceeded to do worse.

He laid it down as a law of the Medes and the Persians, that his lad Archie was not to speak a word of serious love to any living girl until he had turned two-and-twenty; nor was he to think of marrying till he was twenty-five. Penalty—the awful testamentary shilling. *Ac vinclis et carcere frænatus*. This was hard on Crump junior, and gave him a sense of bondage which bred rebel-

lion. For Crump was only just turned one-and-twenty, and meanwhile Guenilda Muskerri—eighteen, lovable, and marriageable—hung like the morning star on his near horizon, and he could only worship afar, and then, as it were, with but one eye, the other being required to look over his shoulder, lest the man with the shilling should loom in sight.

Hitherto, like a dutiful son, Crump had respected the parental injunction, and had refrained from making love to Guenilda. He drew a nice distinction, however, between making love to a girl, and letting a girl see as a simple fact in nature that So-and-so was in love with her. Seeing that a man could not control his sentiments—only the expression of them,—the commandment itself simply ran, Thou shalt not make love until thou hast turned two-and-twenty years. Given a tree and the lady beneath it, was it in

the bond that he might not stand in front and soliloquize? That he might not apostrophize the tree in the language of tender passion? That were absurd, being equivalent to saying that a man could not commune aloud with his own heart, or even talk with his dog. No, it was not in the bond, decided Crump. Acting on this decision, when in the girl's company he had projected his sentiment a number of times on to various pieces of the landscape furniture, and hung trees and rocks with images of his passion. Guenilda herself would have declared he had never breathed to her a syllable of love. Yet she knew that he loved her, and, as she said, when he came near to her she shuddered. Of these two facts, the first was known to Crump, and the second was not. How was he likely to know anything so monstrous, so insulting? Shudder at his approach!

Was Crump an ogre, then? Let him show himself. Five feet ten inches he measures without his boots; his frame is muscular and well-knit; his mouth is his father's, large and firm, very firm; while his eyes might have been Lady Poloc's, so bright and black and bold are they. Having thrown off his furred topcoat, one may see for himself how well he looks in his single-breast blue coat, with long waist and brass buttons of newest design, his swandown waistcoat, white corduroys, buttoned in front over the shin-bone, and joined by the long tops of his fashionably short boots; not to omit the dainty cravat of spotted muslin, and the famous belcher handkerchief. A well-dressed gentlemanlike kind of ogre, with nothing of the ploughman and mule-driver about him.

What was there about him for any girl to shudder at? His breath was sweet, his teeth

were white, his nose was straight, his manners were good, and his voice could murmur soft words softly with the best of lady-killers. Guenilda Muskerry said that he was not a good man, and hence the shudder. What was it not to be a Good Man? Did it mean that he was a Bad Man? That he was an ogre? Who can tell? Of one thing, however, we may be quite sure—to wit, that when the Guenildas of the race say of a man, He is not a Good Man, it is time for the gentleman to cast about for a *locus pœnitentiæ*, wherein to fast and pray and cover his body with sackcloth and his head with ashes, for his moral health is badly impaired, as sure as bones are bones.

That Guenilda Muskerry could seriously care for a penniless ploughman like Poloc, seemed incredible to Crump; but his fundamental contempt for the resisting power of a woman's heart exposed to masculine bland-

ishments, a contempt that was the outcome of a rake's experience, induced him to regard in a serious light the degree of familiarity existing between Poloc and Mistress Guenilda. To himself, he had not the hardihood to deny that Poloc possessed certain physical attractions which were denied to himself. In an antiquarian, historical, and genealogical sense, Poloc attached to himself, unquestionably, a profound interest, fascinating and romantic. And there was danger that Guenilda Muskerry would be extremely susceptible to an interest that made almost a religious and semi-spiritual appeal to her historic imagination.

On the other hand, and as a fair offset, Crump stood with both feet on hard, current, actual facts. The world that is, ever takes precedence of the world that was. The Past can never successfully compete with the Present. Poloc was of the past. Crump was of

the present. The Polocs had had their day—ay, their year, their century, wellnigh their millennium. To-day the Crumps held the field. And unless she was a fool, Mistress Guenilda would prefer the strong to-day over the broken yesterday. Musing in this wise, Crump paced the room, with folded arms and frowning face. In about half an hour, Poloc came along, and Crump tapped on the window and beckoned him in.

CHAPTER X.

DRAWING DRY FOOT.

POLOC looked at the window and shook his head, and kept on his way, with the air of one busy with his own thoughts. Crump came out to the porch and called out, in a tone of reproach—

“ Well, aren’t you going to say, How do you do ? to a fellow, after he has been away as far as London ? ”

Poloc stopped short. He had quite forgotten, for the time being, that Crump had been away in town. He came forward and shook hands with him, saying—

“ I am glad to see you back again safe and

sound. I was so busy thinking, when you called me, I never thought it was you. When did you get back ? ”

“ Came by the mail to-day ; haven't been home yet. Come in for a few minutes, won't you ? ”

Not to seem churlish or distant, Poloc went in. Yet it went a little against the grain to do so, for the reason that just now he was living a very strenuous life of thought and feeling in a world of his own. And somehow, it seemed like passing from severe and lofty harmony to vulgar discord, to quit the world of his imagination for the round of frivolous materialities in which Crump's talk would soon involve him. It was always so when he had been with Guenilda. She touched his spirit with something of her own selectness, and austere dignity, and spiritual niceness. She evoked in him a responsive elevation of sentiment and nobility of tone ;

physically, he carried himself half an inch higher for hours after he had left her. He had, moreover, other reasons to-day for desiring to be left to his own thoughts.

Guenilda Muskerri for the first time had, to-day, succeeded in driving home a thought that was almost as painful as it was fearfully delicious, and which filled Poloc's heart and brain with a strange tumult. This was nothing less than her willingness, nay, her determination to take him at his word and go with him to Gretna Green, rather than allow him to go from her to seek his fortune. He had made the proposition in the spirit of sadness, and as a kind of bitter jest; a rough barrier between his resolve and her impotency. But as he held to his resolve based on good and sufficient reason—that column of true dignity in man,—she refused to let go his jest, and made wise with charming wilfulness to see in it nothing of jest or

barrier. In their chance meeting to-day they had reached a final decision. For weal or woe they were to be man and wife ere the already expiring year was dead! Weighted with such new and burning thoughts of destiny, small wonder was it that Ralph Poloc entered with reluctance the parlour at the "Leather Bottle."

Said Crump, after the landlady had served them and retired, closing the door after her—

"Poloc, there's something I wanted to have a word with you about. I think there is an apology due to you, and I am here to pay it. Of course you know what I refer to?"

Poloc shook his head, and kept his eyes on the glowing logs. "No, I can't say that I do," he added.

"I refer to the offer which my father made you of a situation at the Hall. Though, of course, if you didn't mind it,

there isn't much use in saying anything about it."

"I think Lady Poloc—my mother—said it was a groom your father wanted?"

"Yes. The place is filled now, I believe."

"The Squire thought the place would suit me?"

"I guess so. He is a rum old fish, you know, at times."

"And you think he owes me an apology, eh?"

"Well, yes. That is, if you minded it at all. If we cut a fellow, the least we can do is to offer him a bit of diachylon."

"I see. No, I did not mind it a fig. Why should I? But I am apt to think, Crump, all the same, now we are on the subject, that the man who could offer Ralph Poloc a groomship, couldn't offer him an apology which it would not be degradation to accept."

Poloc looked straight in his companion's eyes, as he spoke with a quiet self-possession and calm dignity that lent sharpness and momentum to his words.

Crump's eyes shot fire, and his sallow face grew red. For some little time he was silent ; then he said, with a hard laugh—

“After all, you did mind it then, it seems. When he wrote and told me what he had done, I sat straight down and wrote him a pretty sharp letter. I said it was a confounded insult to offer you. He swears he did it thoughtlessly, and without the least intention of hurting your feelings. And I believe him.”

This was biting the thumb at truth with a vengeance ; for it so happened that it was Crump himself who had persuaded the Squire that Poloc would probably be only too glad to accept the situation of groom. Asked his reason for doing so, he would have answered

that it was a joke ; which would have been superficially true. But below the joke there was a spirit of cruelty, of insolence, and of envy and jealousy. To snub a poor, proud Poloc, was a form of amusement in which he was quite ready to indulge surreptitiously, but which his love of a whole skin prevented him doing openly. Just now he would have liked to show off a bit, and resent the keen contempt of Poloc ; but a moment's reflection had convinced him that he would lose more than he would gain by a quarrel. If he was to get to the bottom of this Guenilda business, it was obviously his cue to mollify Poloc. So he bit his thumb at truth, without the slightest twinge of conscience.

Answered Poloc, " If he says so, I too will believe him. I would rather think he was a fool than a knave."

At this, Crump's rage rose up within him with the sensation of a gaseous fume, and

to hide it he broke out into a loud harsh laugh.

"Come, come, Poloc, that's not bad. I wish the governor could have heard it. He would have thought more than ever that adversity had failed to tame the proud Polocs. But time will work wonders yet, my dear fellow. But there, let us forget all about it. A wretched blunder shouldn't be allowed to spoil friendship. Now, old man, out with the secret. Who was she?"

This sudden turn caused Poloc's eyes to open.

"Now, come," continued Crump, "don't look so innocent. Who was she? I ask."

"Who was who?"

"Well, I happened to be at the window, and it strikes me I saw you just turning the bend down the road, in company with a fine-stepping girl. You were gone all too soon, but I should know her again."

“Do you think so? Happen she was a stranger round here,” said Poloc, with a sense of relief that Crump had not recognised Guenilda, whom evidently he had also not seen on her way back.

“Oh, that is all gammon. I judge she was some pretty farmer’s daughter or other. Is it to the tune of Light o’ Love, eh?”

“No, I’ll leave you to step it to that tune. You seem to think that is the only music worth playing to women.”

“Egad! I know one thing—they like it. But, Poloc, there’s no more truth in thee than in a drawn fox. I can draw dry foot though, old man, as well as any hound, and I shall run the game to earth yet. Nay, what is your hurry?”

“I must be getting on home. There is work waiting to be done,” said Poloc, rising to his feet.

“Well, before you go, just answer one

question : Was it really Miss Guenilda Muskerri, or did my eyes deceive me ? ”

The question fairly staggered Poloc, but he ran his surprise more into his shoulders than his face. With a shrug, he answered—

“ The chances are that your eyes deceived you. Running to hot scent isn't drawing dry foot. Good afternoon.”

And he was gone, with Crump's laugh of mockery and knowingness ringing in his ears.

After this, Crump's liking for Poloc grew immensely in root and branch, and hardly a day went by without him seeking his company. It did not matter whether Poloc was ploughing, or hauling timber, or cutting firewood, or carting with Nick between the shafts, the well-dressed Crump was pretty sure to turn up, and spend an hour chattering on every conceivable subject on which they could have a thought in common. And

as often as practicable, Crump would persuade his dear friend to meet him at the "Leather Böttle," afternoon or evening, as suited Poloc's convenience best. Sometimes, but not often, they were joined by Muskerry. Just now, Crump seemed a little shy with Muskerry, for some reason or other, and found sufficient pleasure in the society of the ploughman and mule-driver.

Poloc had never known him to be so open, so gracious, so compliant, so ductile, so receptive. He was chagrined at his own profound misjudgment of Crump. He had thought him tainted with insolence, obsequiousness, heartlessness, and levity—veins that were apt to catch the eye and colour the judgment, to the detraction of the remaining mass of his nature. It was of the nature of a revelation to discover that Crump had fine and subtle feelings, strong convictions, together with a group of spiritual aspirations

and predilections that would have done honour to the professionally good man. Poloc was amazed at the unfortunate skilfulness—due, no doubt, to an exquisite sensitiveness of soul—with which Crump had managed to hide so completely, from the common eye, the true and beautiful light of his character.

All this time Crump was drawing dry foot, and hunting counter. But Poloc, against his judgment and his conscience and his heart, and only because he had so promised Guenilda, kept his secret to its lair, and would not let it show so much as the quivering tips of its *vibrissæ*. To Crump's thinking, this was nothing less than detestable secretiveness, akin to mean duplicity, on the part of Poloc, which justified him in meeting guile with guile. He told himself, with a fine affectation of personal sincerity, that Poloc was doing him a great moral damage in thus diverting him from his natural course of

frankness and loyalty, and driving him to resort to wile and stratagem. But though painful to his honourable feelings, duty was duty; and not without contemptible sophistry could he pretend to believe that it was not his duty to do his best to part such an ill-assorted couple as Guenilda Muskerry and Ralph Poloc.

Whatever superficial and uninformed persons may think, there can be little doubt that nature is secretly inclined towards lofty morality and pure justice; and that in consequence of this secret and profound inclination, circumstances, apparently accidental, capricious, remote, and blind, are cunningly shaped and marshalled so as to lend aid and assistance to the good soul, that is trying to do its duty along the deep and universal lines of rectitude. This happy and elevated belief—on which, by the way, Crump had eloquently expatiated one afternoon, for his

dear friend's benefit—was signally illustrated at the very time when Crump was bemoaning the sad necessity of playing at diamond cut diamond.

It chanced one evening, cold and wet, that Crump ascended to the harness-room, thinking he heard the new groom up there. In this, however, he was mistaken, and he was turning to leave, when his glance was attracted by the cheerful blaze of a fire in the groom's room, on the opposite side of the stable-yard. A second glance revealed a situation of unusual interest. The groom was in his room, and with him was a girl with a pretty face, a charming figure, and dressed with marked neatness and taste. They were evidently lovers. Crump was so interested that he brought a stool near to the window, and sat and watched the piquant comedy as seen by the firelight. The maid was coy but not cold, and the man was

ardent and bold ; and along these lines the pretty folly ran on all-fours with the stale experience of the race. A brief spell of passion-blown delirium, to be followed by sanity grown big with windy wisdom, mockery, reproach, and the unspeakable philosophy of—I told you so !

The groom—who had been employed for some time at Muskerry Park previous to his engagement at the Hall—was accosted next morning by Crump, who said—

“ Jevons, was that your sweetheart I saw you with last night ? ”

Jevons, having a guilty conscience, assumed the look of innocence as he answered—

“ And where might you see us, sir ? ”

At which Crump laughed and said—

“ Oh, you were behaving perfectly proper when I saw you. You were crossing the meadow together.”

“ Yes, sir, that wor my lass. We’ve

walked wi' one another this twelvemonth," answered Jevons, considerably relieved.

"And you love each other in true Arcadian fashion, I have no doubt?"

"We do that, sir," replied the groom, with a broad grin.

"Who is she? I could not see her face, of course, but I thought I ought to know her figure, which, by the way, Jevons, is a remarkably good one."

"And thank you, sir, seeing as how you're no mean judge of a woman's figure—meaning no offence, sir. She knows you, sir, well enough. She is lady's-maid to Miss Muskerry, who thinks a world of her."

"Ah, yes; I thought I had seen her before."

Then Crump began to whistle in a meditative way, while the groom stood in a respectful attitude awaiting his *cong  *. After a while, Crump came out of his thoughts and said—

“Come with me, Jevons, into your room. I want to have a private talk with you.”

And with his heart in his boots, Jevons led the way into his chamber. There, out of hand, with skill and nerve did Crump apply moral thumbkins to the luckless groom; and then he tickled his fancy with a feather from the goose that lays golden eggs, and wound up by greasing his palm with auriferous ointment. The operation was a perfect success. When, in the course of forty minutes, Crump ascended the steep drive that ran from the stables to the Hall, he murmured to himself—

“Master — Man — Maid — Mistress. Extremes meet. On the hinges of man and maid shall yet swing together the great doors of master and mistress. If the knave can only match performance with promise, I will show Mr Mule-driver who can draw dry foot.”

The tree thus planted by Crump throve as it had been planted by the rivers of waters, and bore fruit enough and to spare, but the taste thereof was bitter. This was plainly shown by a little incident that occurred one morning about a week later. Breakfast was over at Muskerry Park, and father and son were still at the table. The private letter-bag had just arrived, and the two men were leisurely opening their letters. Suddenly the elder one gave a snort of angry contempt, and followed it up with a well-meant oath. It was a swearing age, but in this particular the old gentleman was above his age and the majority of his equals.

The young man looked up quickly, remarking, "Bad news in the air, one would think."

"The scoundrel! If I only had him within reach of a horsewhip! There! read it, and tell me what you think of it," cried the father, tossing a letter across the table.

Muskerry took it, and read as follows :—

“ Desembur 9th 1810.

“SQUIRE MUSKERRY.

“ ONERED SUR,—Appen you dunna know as how your neece is a-carryin’ on with a young man as shall be nameless for all his name rimes with poor an’ prowld. I herd a woman as I knows well enow for a onest un for all shees a reglar fuzzbag say yester e’en that commun fame as gotten owd o’ your neeces good name and is trashin’ it in the mud.—Your umble an obejunt servunt,

“ A WORD TO THE WISE.”

Muskerry read this anonymous reptilian composition, in the light of a knowledge that was denied his father, and he saw in a moment that it referred to Poloc. His mind, naturally enough, reverted to Crump, and he studied the writing closely for some time.

At length he threw the letter down with a scornful laugh.

“Well, sir, and what do you make of it?” asked the old gentleman, sternly.

“I should put it in the fire, and think no more about it. That is the only way to deal with such garbage.”

“But what does it mean? Whom does it refer to? Hadn't I better have Guenilda in, and hear what she has to say about it? It has quite upset me.”

“No, I don't think you ought to trouble Guen with the wretched thing. Goodness knows what it means, except that somebody round about here is a mean cur. If our Guen cannot be trusted to take care of her own and our good name, I am out of my reckoning.”

“Yes, yes, Percival—that is true, quite true. I have every confidence in Guenilda. But—well, sir, she is only a woman, and a

young one at that. And the very best of girls sometimes——” He paused as if unwilling to put his thoughts into words.

Said the son——“I do not know that there would be any harm done by your looking after her a bit, and having a sort of fatherly talk with her. Not because of this vile scrawl; no, by George! I have thought for some time that she was worth a little more attention than she gets from you.”

Muskerry spoke with the air of a man of the world, seasoned in the wisdom of life, rich in the philosophy born of wide experience.

His father looked at him with open eyes. “A Daniel come to judgment!” he murmured with milky irony. He added, “I am not sure but what you are right, my son. You have no idea who could have written this?”

“Not the slightest. The spelling, I think,

is an artifice, and the hand is of course disguised. It looks, oddly enough, like Archie Crump's hand, though of course——"

"Tut, tut! You might as well—shh!"

There was a sudden rustle of petticoats, and the next moment the half-closed door hard by was pushed open, and Guenilda came in. Her colour was deeper than usual, and her glorious eyes held a light beautiful as strange.

"Well, dear uncle, and what do you find in your letters this morning to keep you at the table so long?" she asked, smiling sweetly, with a certain grave lightness of tone and bearing that lent to her a quaint dignity that was very charming, in the eyes and ears of the white-headed old gentleman who now removed his gold eye-glasses from his nose, and said, in pleasant voice—

"Ah, niece, niece, you are a very nice girl, but I wish you had been a boy instead!"

The anonymous letter - writer is always a coward, and generally a knave to boot. When not an actual, he is always a potential liar, shrinking from no falsehood to avoid detection. Crump had fallen to the base level of a writer of anonymous letters. Of course he fell back upon his conscience—such gentry are always strong in conscience at what time they had need have none—and assumed a high moral attitude. His sense of duty was heroic and sublime. Had he been girded from before his birth to fight the World, the Flesh, and the Devil all rolled into one, he could not have poised himself more bravely. Being capable of the act, it follows that he was incapable of judging its real quality. In which truth there surely lurks an element of apology available for all the miserably erring tribe.

Putting two and two together, Muskerrey imbibed just the faintest suspicion of Crump.

It was more a haunting suggestion than anything else, but it was quite enough to make him unhappy. When he met Crump a few days later, he said straight out—

“Crump, my father has had an anonymous letter. Do you know anything about it?”

“An anonymous letter, eh? What the deuce should I know about it? What was it about? Some maiden all forlorn who wishes, too late, she had never been born? Be sure your sins will find you out, old man,” quoth Crump, with great good-humour.

“It is nothing to laugh about, I can tell you. It referred to Guenilda. I should be glad of a direct answer, old fellow. Did you write it, send it, cause it to be written or sent? Do you know anything or nothing about it?”

There was that in Muskerry's tone that caused Crump to hesitate a little. Then he

looked his companion in the face, and said, solemnly—

“I know nothing about it.”

“You mean that? On your word of honour?”

“On my word of honour! Damme! you are a bit rough, I take it,” said Crump, snappishly.

“I am only too glad to ask your forgiveness for ever even fearing you might have been tempted to do such a vile thing. You see, old fellow, if you really had done it, I should have had to horsewhip you, if it had cost me my life. I could have nothing to do with the scoundrel who could do a thing like that. Gentlemen with gentlemen. Reptiles with reptiles. Give me your hand. You don't know what a relief it is!”

“Oh, I'm not a fellow to bear malice,” said Crump, as he took Muskerrey's hand, and took and gave a hearty shake.

For all that, the mighty subterranean force of Hate awoke that moment in his soul, and divided him for ever from Muskerry, by a chasm without bridge or bottom. It stung him terribly to think that Muskerry should hold as something despicable, what he himself regarded as nothing worse than a vulgar artifice. As for the lie he had told upon his honour, he admitted to himself that it was awkward and regrettable; but inasmuch as he would have been a fool to have owned up, it followed that he was perfectly justified in prevaricating. In short, his ethical system had the obvious merit of elasticity and self-adjustment, without which qualities a system of ethics is sure to breed austerity, bigotry, and fanaticism.

But the man who had driven him to assume this attitude of sophistry and defiant self-justification was not so much Muskerry as Poloc — Poloc, who was always crossing

his path in one way or another. To hate Poloc was no irksome task, and it soon became a fierce delight. Moreover, Crump had the consolation of knowing that his letter had borne fruit.

Guenilda was no longer left to herself, but of a sudden found herself the object of her uncle's untiring devotion. He rode, walked, talked, and played draughts with her, and seemed unhappy when she was out of his sight. What in the world she would have done, at this time when she found it impossible to see Poloc, without the aid of her maid—the nimble, witty, honest, pretty, and altogether good Lucy—she did not know. She found it necessary to take the girl into her confidence, and trust her with letters, messages, and like matters of high state.

The first time the two lovers met after what seemed a fearfully long separation, Guenilda told Poloc of the few words she

had overheard her cousin and uncle say at the breakfast-table.

“Ralph, dearest, beware of Archibald Crump. I feel sure he is your enemy,” she said, very seriously.

But Poloc laughed incredulously, and said, “Enemy or no enemy, I think I know him well enough now to say, he would never do such a contemptible thing as that.”

CHAPTER XI.

A MAD WAGER.

THERE were attics innumerable under the roofs of the "Bull i' th' Thorn," and into one of the most remote of these entered Poloc, candle in hand, early one evening about the middle of the month. He was supposed to be out for the evening, by his mother and father; but though he had left the house half an hour earlier, he had re-entered it by one of the several means of ingress known only to himself. The attic in question was a small room, very low, with heavy thick rafters overhead, and a pile of old lumber heaped up along the low side of

the chamber, until it touched the roof. Putting the rusty tin candlestick upon the floor, Poloc attacked the pile of miscellaneous *débris* in the middle, and in a few minutes had opened a narrow passage that reached back to the wall. There, carefully stowed away in a deep recess, he found what apparently he was in search of—a small wooden trunk painted green, locked, corded, and sealed.

Poloc brought it out from its hiding-place and set it on the open floor; and when he had broken the seal, removed the cords, and unlocked it, instead of opening it he stood erect, with bended head and folded arms and knitted brows, gazing at the dust-covered trunk, like one who paused, irresolute, on the brink of some desperate deed. Presently, with a deep sigh, he sank on one knee, and, lifting up the lid, balanced thereon the candlestick, by which means he got a

tallow-dip view of the interior of the box. He removed the layer of paper on the top; and then with pious care did Poloc proceed to empty the trunk, placing the contents, as he extracted them one at a time, on the piece of paper on the floor.

First there came a court dress—his grandfather's; next, a white silk waistcoat magnificently embroidered, a pair of silver-mounted pistols, a dagger with a golden haft in which were sunk two fine rubies, a pair of lady's slippers of the seventeenth century, a bundle of parchments with seals on them as large as saucers, a broken sword, a silver drinking-cup of the fourteenth century curiously engraved and bearing the Poloc arms, a silver cream-ewer with the same arms; and finally, wrapped round with a double layer of flannel and purple silk, was a small plaque of solid gold, bearing in the centre a medallion portrait of Henry VIII., surmounted by the

royal arms. This had been given to one of Poloc's ancestors by Henry, the king, himself.

These few things were all that remained of the former treasures of the Polocs. To the dimensions of this handful of heirlooms, had shrunk the greatness that had once stretched from shire to shire. Seven hundred years of growth and husbandry, of dignity and honour, of wealth and power, and the result nothing but a few relics in a wooden box painted green. But, by the same token, those few heirlooms were no baubles in the eyes of Sir Ralph Poloc. Compared with their sanctity, the holiest relic in Christendom was unconsecrate as a bone in a kennel; while their value, like that of wisdom, was beyond the price of rubies. Her ladyship, also, held them as objects of a semi-religious character, and she would just as soon have committed sacrilege as made away with the least of them.

Poloc put on one side the pistols, dagger, cream-ewer, drinking-cup, and plaque, and returned the other articles to the box, which he locked and corded and replaced in the recess, piling up again the old lumber in front. He examined carefully the pieces he had left out, and after some time he proceeded to secrete each piece among the rafters, out of sight but within easy reach. Then he blew out the candle, and made his way out as noiselessly as he had entered, and went through the village in the direction of Muskerry Park.

His head throbbed with fiery pain, and his heart was heavy as lead. The greatest trouble of his life was upon him, and to crown all he had a strong nervous consciousness of criminality. He was about to do a thing that smacked, to his thinking, of sacrilege, of crime, of dishonour. This was not his judgment, but his senti-

ment. His reason, cold and critical and passionless, backed him indeed. But his sentiment, full-coloured, rich and warm, and a humaner and more vital part of his being than dry reason, accused him in accents of reproach that cut him to the quick. Yet what could he do? Here he was on the eve of an elopement and a long journey northwards—with no money in his pocket.

Guenilda, though mistress of half of her fortune, had always left everything in her uncle's hands. Punctually, on each quarter-day, her uncle paid into her hands fifty pounds. Of her last quarterage, she had now just twenty-one left; and under the circumstances, both she and Poloc felt that it would be folly for her to ask her uncle for more. The anonymous letter had rendered that impracticable. How long after their marriage they would have to wait, before Guenilda could legally get possession of her own,

neither of them knew. One thing, however, was certain, money must be got from somewhere for immediate purposes. A little while ago, Poloc would have braced himself up to ask Crump to lend him fifty pounds; but, somehow, he could not do that now. Not that he for a moment believed that Crump had anything to do with the anonymous letter, but Guenilda did, and that settled the matter as far as asking him to lend money went.

In his utter perplexity, Poloc saw but one gleam of hope, and that baleful and sickening. It shone from the precious heirlooms. In the county town he knew a jeweller who dealt in similar antiques, and who would doubtless be only too glad to lend fifty pounds on the gold and silver pieces. It would only be for a few months at most, and with prudence there was no reason why Sir Ralph should ever dream that the priceless

relics were not safe in the attic. Still the reflection, that he was about to do what would fill his father with unspeakable agony and dismay, should he ever discover it, was enough to make Poloc wretched to a degree. There was, indeed, another hope just budding, and liable to be nipped with the frost of disappointment. Guenilda had written to a friend, to whom she had lent a hundred pounds, asking her if she could repay her in whole or in part. Guenilda would have heard by now, and it was to learn the outcome that Poloc was now on his way to a certain group of black rocks not far from Muskerry Park, where the nimble and altogether good Lucy was in the habit of depositing delicately tinted envelopes, redolent of perfume, faint and ravishing.

When he arrived at the spot, Poloc found just such an envelope lying snug and close in a chink in a rock. As he had no means

of reading it until he came within range of some cottage light or other, he put the letter into his coat-pocket and started back towards home.

When close to the village, he was overtaken by Muskerry on horseback.

“Good night!” said Poloc, as the rider went cantering by.

“Hallo! is that you, Poloc?”

“Yes. I guessed it was you from your horse’s step. Going far?”

“Oh dear, no. I promised Crump I would spend an hour or two with him at the ‘Leather Bottle’ this evening. Aren’t you coming?”

“No, I think not. I believe I half promised Crump I would, but I don’t feel like it to-night. I have a nasty head, for one thing.”

But Muskerry did his best to persuade him, and Poloc finally consented, thinking

to himself that perhaps it was wise policy to show himself as much as possible just now. At the "Leather Bottle," Muskerry rode his nag into the stable-yard, and Poloc seized the opportunity of reading Guenilda's letter, by the light of the oil-lamp that swung in the porch. A glance was sufficient to show him that the budding hope was in truth nipped, and that Guenilda's plan had failed. There was nothing for it now but to borrow on the security of the heirlooms.

A great wave of sickness swept over Poloc, as he put up the letter and then entered the inn parlour.

"You look deucedly pale, old man," exclaimed Crump, as he shook Poloc warmly by the hand.

"Do I? Well, I will try what a hot drink will do for me," said Poloc, with a strange hard laugh as he pulled the bell-cord.

With pipe and glass, Crump's inexhaustible reminiscences of Town life, war echoes, occasional songs, and the manifold talk that circled round the deep rich and familiar theme of country life, the evening sped along at that nimble pace affected by cheerful careless Mirth, in her less boisterous moods.

Suddenly, the outside stillness was broken by the sound of rumbling wheels, and the heavy beat of horses' feet. From the multitudinous thunder of hoofs, one could gather that it was no ordinary post-chaise that was coming along. Impelled by a common instinct of curiosity, all three sprang to their feet and left the room. They had barely got into the porch when a heavy yellow-bodied chariot, hung on leathern springs and drawn by six horses, came rattling up, and halted opposite the inn. Then in a flash, as from the bowels

of the earth, appeared the ostler and stable-boy with buckets and lanthorns in hand; they were joined with equal celerity by one of the postilions, and in a very little time the horses were watered, and the stately chariot with its couple of flaring lamps rumbled off into the darkness. The three men re-entered the parlour.

“I don’t envy the Duke his ten-mile of a drive home,” said Muskerry, warming his hands at the fire.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind taking his place, seeing that the Duchess was inside. Lovely creature that, if you like!” observed Crump.

“And as good as she is beautiful,” remarked Poloc.

“Good, eh? Oh yes, very good, the darling! I have been in Town, you know, Poloc, and one picks up a thing or two there. All I have got to say is—when I am an old Duke, catch me marrying a young

beauty! And the old duffer thinks she is the very model of——”

“It is to be hoped they won’t meet the man with a sorrel mare and a yellow-lined cloak,” interrupted Muskerrey, who saw that Crump’s tongue was a bit loose.

“No fear of that; he hasn’t shown himself round here this five years. The war has put an end to those gentry,” responded Crump.

“I am not so sure of that. Why, it was only last year that the mail was stopped and robbed this side York,” put in Poloc.

And so the topic was started that appealed so strongly to the imaginations, and not infrequently to the startled memories, of our dear old great-grandmothers, and fathers in the same degree. There followed an argument that ran like a crafty fox at first, and then like the same animal when he finds that craft is of no avail, only speed and

bottom, and the hunt grows hot behind him.

"You think he could be stopped in his own grounds, do you? I'll bet you what you like he couldn't." It was Crump that spoke, and his face was flushed.

"All right. But who is to prove it?" answered Poloc, and his eyes were unusually bright.

"I thought you said that you could?" said Crump, with a touch of irony.

"Happen I did, and I stick to it. But I could do a lot of things that I don't intend to, all the same," answered Poloc, laughing.

"I should say not. Bonaparte! but you surely did not think Poloc meant to actually prove his point, did you?" cried Muskerry.

"No, I'll be hanged if I ever thought he would!" exclaimed Crump, and his tone lent a keen edge to his words.

Poloc kept his brow clear and his tongue

curbed, but he pulled his moustache a little violently. Suddenly, he gave a slight start as an idea crossed his mind.

“What will you bet me that I do not prove my point?” he enquired, looking at Crump, with a peculiar smile on his face.

Crump’s eyes gave a sudden flash. “I’ll bet you two to one—three to one—four to one—five to one—six——”

“All right; the odds will suit me at five to one. How far will you go?”

“Just as high as you like, my boy.”

Poloc unbuttoned his coat, and took out from an inside pocket an old pocket-book. Out of this he drew four five-pound Bank of England notes, new and crisp, and laid them on the table. They were Guenilda’s notes—all the money, within a few pounds, they two could raise between them. Involuntarily Poloc heaved a deep sigh as he spread them out. It was a desperate wager he was laying,

but he thought of the heirlooms, and his courage hardened into hardihood.

Said he, "I can go so far; which makes it a hundred to twenty."

"Very good, old man. Mine shall be ready in twelve hours. You will hold the stakes for us, Muskerry?"

"Not if I know it! Man alive! rob the Duke in his own park! You are mad!"

But friendship's claims were not thus to be ignored; and after a while, when his mind had familiarised itself with the idea, somewhat,—assisted by another serving of hot drinks round—Muskerry undertook the office of stake-holder.

"But look here," he said; "you, Crump, and you, Poloc, will just swear solemnly to preserve an honourable silence on the matter to your dying days."

"I swear," answered Poloc.

"I swear," answered Crump.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW THE WAGER WAS WON.

It was a dull misty afternoon, and his Grace, accompanied by his lovely young consort, was taking a short drive in a closed carriage drawn by a couple of horses. They were a good mile from the House, in a part of the park that was thickly wooded. In addition to the postilion and two footmen, a number of ladies and gentlemen and several grooms were in close proximity, galloping their horses over the mossy turf and under the trees. These soon had their attention arrested by a horseman, who was coming on at a hard gallop apparently from the House,

but instead of following the drive, he was making a short cut across the park. The new-comer was mounted on a superb cream-coloured mare, and as he drew near, underneath his military cloak were glimpses of a uniform; he wore also a bob-wig and a military hat. Under his left arm hung a leathern bag, that looked fat with important despatches.

As he approached the ducal carriage the postilion halted the horses, while several of the gentlemen on horseback drew near, attracted by curiosity and eager to learn what important news had arrived from the Government. The stranger, however, drew from beneath his cloak a roll of despatches, tied with red tape and bearing several large seals; and with this he waved the intruders back, with a flourish of authority that no one dreamed of disputing. He sprang from his horse, just as the carriage-

window—which was hung on hinges like the door—was thrown open, and her Grace showed her bewitching face in the opening.

Said Poloc—for our wagering hero it was —“With your Grace’s permission, I would speak with the Duke a moment?”

“Oh, certainly,” murmured the fair lady, sinking back into her seat beside her lord.

Poloc put his head into the carriage, and, exhibiting the roll of despatches, said, “Can your Grace bear to hear bad news?”

“Bad news, bad news,—what do you mean? Have we lost a battle, then? Who sent you? Give me the papers, man!” cried the Duke, making a sign for the Duchess to take the papers and pass them.

But Poloc held the roll in his hand, and said, “If you think you can both hear it without making any outcry, I would ask you kindly to—look at this!”

As he spoke, he pointed at them the roll

of despatches, from the end of which protruded the bright barrel of a pistol! The Duchess drew back, and Poloc's hand went swiftly but gently to her beautiful mouth, just in time to check a scream. As for the Duke, his face flushed deeply, and, with a mighty oath of ducal dimensions, he cried—

“You are a bold rogue, sir, as ever stole a purse. Don't you see that my attendants are swarming round you?”

And in truth they were, for several of the riders, attracted by the loud tones of the Duke, had drawn near. Poloc's sensations just then were anything but pleasant. He saw his danger, and felt that nothing but audacity and good luck could bring him off safely. He gave a hearty laugh, and said in a voice that all could hear—

“Yes, your Grace, that is true. My lord will be pleased to hear it.”

Then, sinking his voice low, he added,

“If you value your life, sir, you will speak in a lower tone.”

He turned next to the group of riders, who were admiring his beautiful mare, and with a look of surprise that deepened into anger, he cried—

“Gentlemen, my audience with the Duke is a private one.”

Whereupon they instantly rode off, but not without one of them exclaiming fiercely—

“Hang his insolence, for an upstart letter-carrier !”

Poloc put his head again into the carriage, and unslinging his despatch-bag, handed it to the Duchess, saying—

“I am extremely sorry, but I must beg of you to waste no time. Notes, coins, watches, chains, seals, rings, and anything else you can spare of value. That ruby shawl-pin is really too pretty to leave

behind me, and your Grace's bracelets would not care to be parted from those rings; though I can understand they are loath to leave your Grace's lovely hands."

The ducal pair submitted to the inevitable, and were only too glad to hasten the withdrawal of that sinister-looking barrel, by stripping themselves of all their valuables. They half filled the bag with their contributions. It was a big haul, and what with moneys, jewels, precious stones, and her Grace's chronometer with its monogram of diamonds, the booty was worth a clear thousand pounds. Poloc received the bag with a gracious bow.

"Now, be off with you, you scoundrel!" said the Duke, thinking it prudent, however, to make his tone pleasant almost to jocularity.

Said Poloc, "As your Grace knows, we are within three hundred yards of the yellow

gate that gives on to the moor. It grieves me to say it, but the Duchess will have to accompany me on foot as far as the gate; and you, your Grace, will have to drive slowly back homewards; and these gentry on horseback will have to keep in front of you. Then I shall be sure of a clear start, and that is all I ask. My mare will carry me forty miles without baiting."

"No, no; I dare not," murmured her Grace.

"Why not? I should not harm you. If you will give me your word of honour not to use it against me unfairly, there is my pistol. It is loaded, and report says your Grace is a dead shot."

"Yes, I will go with you. Only please put up that horrible thing. I do not want it. If I had it, I might be tempted to give you what you deserve. Will you open the door, please?"

Poloc opened the door, and the Duchess descended, wrapped up in fur, and treading the ground daintily, for her shoes were light. The carriage, obedient to the instructions of the gouty Duke within, was turned round and driven slowly off; while the Duchess, waving her hand to the party on horseback, intimated that she did not wish any attendance. Poloc was silent, and the Duchess made no remark until they reached the gate, which turned out to be locked.

“Now, sir, what will you do? You are caught,” exclaimed the Duchess.

“I deserve to be caught, for my carelessness. I must leap it, I suppose. Would you mind holding this for me, till I am over?”

As he spoke, Poloc held out the bag containing the booty. The eyes of the Duchess opened wide with astonishment.

“Yes,” she answered, with a light laugh;

"I will hold it. But suppose I run away with it? I do not understand you a bit."

"Nay, I am sure you would not do that. It would not be honourable!"

"Honourable! You funny creature, what will you say next? Do you know, if you were not a wicked highwayman, I should think you a very interesting young man. You are really going to trust me, then?" she laughed, as she took the bag.

"I have no fears," said Poloc, springing into the saddle.

He rode the mare some distance away, and came back at a gallop, and took the gate in a manner that much pleased her Grace. On the other side, he dismounted and came to the gate.

"You ride beautifully, sir. And I suppose you have need to be a good rider. Here is your bag, and—and—I wish you would please let me have my ruby shawl-pin back.

It belonged to my dear mother who is dead."

Poloc opened the bag, and, after fumbling for a little while, took out the Duke's watch engraved with the ducal crest.

"I am going to take this watch, but within a week the Duke will receive it back again safe and sound. As for this bag and its contents, permit me, madame, with the humblest of apologies, to present it to you," said Poloc.

"Oh, sir, I thank you, indeed I thank you. But this is a comedy. What does it mean?"

"It means, your Grace, that I am no highwayman, only a foolish fellow who laid a wager and wanted to win it."

"But the risk! His Grace will raise the whole country-side, you may be sure, and if you are caught——"

"They could, and probably would, hang

me. Yes, I know. But there was only one other way of getting the money, and I preferred this to that. Won't your Grace plead for me with the Duke?"

Her Grace put her considering-cap on a while, and then she said, "Who are you?"

"Ah, lady, you don't know what you ask me. Yet I will trust you, for I know your heart is too kind to betray me. My name is Ralph Poloc of Poloc."

"What!—Sir Ralph's son?"

"Madame, there is but one Poloc of Poloc!"

"Promise me you will never do the like again?"

"I promise, solemnly."

"Then I will forgive you, and I know the Duke will, if it is only for your name's sake. Take care of his watch; it is his favourite."

In this way did Ralph Poloc win his wager and save the heirlooms.

CHAPTER XIII.

BETWEEN THE CUP AND THE LIP.

THE holly was already cut for the Christmas decorations at Muskerry Hall ; it lay in an open glade in the wood adjoining the park. To-morrow it would be carted to the house, and Guenilda herself was to superintend the hanging of it as usual. She always put her soul into the work, for she was in love with the sentiment of the thing ; but to-day she seemed unusually susceptible, being full of sighs and laughter, sudden starts and flushes, singing and abstraction. But the altogether good and faithful, pretty and witty Lucy, went about demure as a young

Puritan, with a kitten-like innocency of countenance.

It snowed heavily in the afternoon, which made Guenilda almost cross, though a white Christmas was her delight. When, towards evening, the wind changed, and snow gave place to rain, which came pelting down and soon washed away all the whiteness of the land,—oddly enough, Guenilda grew blithe, and hummed to herself the ballad of “Young Lochinvar.” At eleven of the clock, broken masses of black cloud were being driven swiftly along by an upper wind, that failed to disturb the earth stratum of atmosphere by so much as a puff. Between the sailing clouds the stars shone brightly, giving one the sense of light without the reality—a trick that nature repeats in many departments of life, with a gusto that no detection can impair, no staleness can deaden.

Guenilda, muffled from head to foot in rich warm furs, as she daintly stepped through an open window on to a stone balcony, and with soft quick steps descended to the garden below—followed by the altogether good and faithful Lucy, bearing a well-packed bag in her arms—looked up and saw the stars, and straightway felt that the heavens and the earth were full of light more cruel than kind. Never before, she thought, had the sentinels of the sky, those silent and mysterious scouts of the celestial armies ever manœuvring in the hidden fields of space, flashed a radiance so bright, so full, so searching, so mocking, so inquisitive and interrogative.

Nevertheless, she took the wrong turn twice in the shrubberies; and when crossing the wild parkland her feet, being far more in sympathy with the darkness that lurked among the bracken and the

rocks than with the light that danced from star to eye and from eye to star, stumbled again and again into treacherous hollows, and against moss-covered stones and roots, and over the grey and green coated architecture of mole and ant. Still was she of such stuff as dreams are made on that the illusion clung, that it was a singularly and almost maliciously bright night.

Soon she reached a stile in one corner of the park, which gave on to a cross-country road that was rough and but little used. By the stile stood waiting a chaise with a pair of horses. A man came forward, touched his cap, and opened the door of the vehicle, in which Guenilda at once took her seat. The altogether good and faithful Lucy also stepped in, deposited the bag, and, after a short whispered conversation with her mistress, withdrew and closed the door. Then the chaise drove on, and Guenilda

lay back and began to eat of the bitter-sweet root of reflection. She had actually started for Gretna Green !

Her mind was in a whirl, and a tumult of images crowded in upon her, so that for a time she lost sense of her situation. But after a while she became conscious of physical sensations. The road for three or four miles was little better than a ditch, full of holes and ruts filled with water ; to avoid which, and to save the horses from breaking their legs, the postilion kept quartering from side to side. The result being one long series of bumps and jerks, which made it almost an impossible feat for Guenilda to keep to one side of the seat, and soon induced an aching in every bone of her body. It was this that brought her to herself, and stilled the wild tumult of her mind. It occurred to her that she was doing a romantic thing, but with something of wise

irony she asked herself, where the romance came in.

Then she thought of her lover—soon to be her husband—who was to meet her at a certain point, and she said to herself, as she felt the blood burning her face, “Ha! the romance is *there!*”

The delicious thought lingered a while, and she toyed with it delicately and sweetly; but suddenly a cold shiver went through her, as she thought to herself, “What if he should not be there? if illness, or accident, or—or anything should prevent his coming?”

She tried to think it out, and decide what it would be best to do under such circumstances. Then came a jolt of a superior kind, and over she went sideways. She laughed as she righted herself, but she did no more thinking. She was contented to wait patiently, and balance herself dex-

terously, making now and then a desperate clutch at the side of the carriage. Everything has an end sooner or later, and in course of time the vile road was traversed; with a sharp curve the chaise rolled out on to the king's highway, broad and fairly smooth, and the change was so magical, so full of softness and ease, that the girl lay back, and closed her eyes, and fell asleep. Which, taken all in all, was the sweetest bit of romance she was likely to encounter.

As the chaise came to a standstill, Guenilda awoke and looked out. They were at a small posting-house, and all Guenilda could see was the ruddy light of the fire on the diamond panes of the hostel. Then a man appeared with a lanthorn, and she heard voices and laughter. Presently there passed in front of the firelit window a couple of horses, meant for leaders to the chaise, with a mounted postilion. Oddly enough, the pos-

tilion's figure, silhouetted for a moment against the window, brought to her mind the image of Jevons, a former groom of her uncle; the altogether good and faithful Lucy, she recollected, had once cared a little for the man Jevons, though she had thrown him over since he had left Muskerry Park. It did not matter, of course, but still Guenilda would rather that the discharged groom had not been one of her postilions. The chaise began to move, then stopped; the door suddenly opened, and in sprang Poloc.

"All right. Drive on!" he cried, as he pulled to the door.

At the same moment a figure, that might have been mistaken for Crump, came quickly forward from the yard of the hostel, and climbed lightly on to the box-seat in front. The two leaders were fresh, and did a bit of preliminary prancing ere they settled to

collar-work; but the fun was soon over, and the chaise went bowling along with the four horses at a gallop.

Inside, the two lovers sat for some time almost in silence. Guenilda was content to say nothing, but lean her head upon Poloc's breast, and feel his hand playing gently with her face and neck and hair. And Poloc was content to say nothing, but to feel his arm round her waist, to kiss her hair, her brow, her lips, her ear, her eyes—any part of her—she was so divinely sweet, and sweeter now than ever; and to listen to the crunching of the wheels and the loud beating of the horses' hoofs, and to feel that every planting of the feet, and every revolution of the wheels, shortened the perilous interval that lay between the old hated life and the new life, that loomed big with forms of love and light and beauty.

When at length she spoke, Guenilda said,

"Ralph, dearest, who is the front postilion?"

"The front postilion? I am sure I do not know. But you may depend he is a trusty man. Why do you ask, sweet wife?"

The new word sent a thrill through the girl, and she nestled closer to him.

"Nothing in particular, love. When he rode past the window, before you came in, he reminded me of Jevons, the groom, whom uncle discharged not long ago. I do not suppose you remember him, though."

"Yes, I do. The Squire took him on—in place of me!"

"What! Mr Crump?"

"Yes. So it certainly could not have been he, you see."

"No, of course not. I did not know that he had gone to Poloc Hall, though," answered Guenilda, who straightway lapsed again into silence.

She was trying to recall the exact words of the altogether good and faithful Lucy, who had certainly given her to understand, only a few days ago, that when Jevons had left Muskerry Park he had left the neighbourhood entirely. It seemed, however, that she had misunderstood the girl. Here Guenilda tried to dismiss the subject altogether from her mind, but this was singularly beyond her power. A small stick will stir up mud enough to spoil the clearness of a lake. The image of Jevons induced a sense of distrust and uneasiness that gradually discoloured the entire consciousness of Guenilda. She felt troubled and nervous, and had a wretched feeling of some impending calamity.

“I feel sometimes—I feel now, now while your dear form is held in my arms, that I shall never call you my own. Not love will fail us, but the malicious demon that

people call Good Fortune. Circumstances, Guen, are the stones that build up the walls, the prison-wall of destiny. Something tells me they will rise up between us and keep us apart. I will live till then, and fight the demon; afterwards I will die, cursing him."

These had been his words to her some weeks ago, and now they came back to her with startling distinctness, and with an added force, as it were, of prophecy. A deep sigh broke from her.

Instantly Poloc bent down and kissed her, saying—

"I thought you had dropped asleep, love. Are you tired?"

"Oh no, not at all. I have been thinking. You thought once, dearest, that circumstances would rise up between us and keep us apart. Do you feel that now?"

"No, no, not now. Nothing can part us now, my darling," answered Poloc, bravely enough to the ear, but with a strange tingling of nerves.

Just then a church clock struck two. Guenilda gave a slight start, and sat up.

"That sounded just like our church clock," she said.

Answered Poloc, with a laugh, "We are a good twenty miles from the parish of Muskerri, if we are a league."

"Are we really? But I should have said that not a clock in the world could have counterfeited, in my ears, the tongue of our village clock. Where are we, dear—do you know?"

Poloc put his face against the window and looked out: he beheld a solitary star, and the black forms of high hills that had a curiously familiar and home-like aspect.

"I do not make out where we are. I don't

know this part of the country at all. Shall we stop the carriage and enquire?"

"No, never mind, love; perhaps we shall change horses soon."

"Yes, I expect so."

Presently, they came to rising ground, and the horses fell to walking. Guenilda looked out of the window. Suddenly she turned quickly round, and, seizing her lover by the arm, gasped—

"Oh, Ralph, look! look! this is the park—WE ARE AT HOME!"

Poloc sprang from his seat, and, throwing up the window, looked out. It was true. They were in Muskerri park, and were within three hundred yards of the house itself.

"O God, we are betrayed!" he groaned.

Then he put out his head, and shouted fiercely to the postilions to stop; which they answered by putting their whips vigorously

about the horses, who plunged forward at a gallop, throwing Poloc almost off his feet. At the same moment he heard a laugh that sounded horribly familiar; it suggested Crump when he was in a spiteful mood.

“Guenilda, my love, my wife, the worst has happened, but the end is not yet, and to the end—till death—we will be true to each other.”

“Yes, husband mine, till death—Ah!”

The carriage passed through the large handsome gates of bronze right into the central court, and stopped dead, with a jerk. A dozen lanthorns flashed in the darkness, and a confused murmur of voices arose. Poloc threw open the door, and sprang out.

“Where is she, you villain? My niece, Guenilda Muskerry, where is she?” cried a voice trembling with anger, while at the same moment Poloc was seized roughly by the arm.

“Do you think the lady is in my pocket? Where should she be but there in the chaise? Unhand me, sir! I am no villain, but I seek one,” answered Poloc, flinging himself loose.

“If there is law in England, you shall smart for this, young man. Seize him, men! I am a justice of the peace, and I order his arrest,” roared the old gentleman, making for the carriage, wherein Guenilda sat perfectly calm, motionless, and cold; to her it all seemed more like a hideous nightmare than a waking reality. Several men barred Poloc’s way, but he pushed them aside; only one fellow laid a hand upon him, and he the next moment reeled and fell backwards, under the force of Poloc’s blow.

Then Poloc strode forward, and, seizing the leading postilion, dragged him off his horse to the ground. The man fought like a bull-dog, but Poloc fought like a lion. He dragged him forward, till the light of

a suspended lamp fell upon the man's face. Then he saw with a start that it was none other than Jevons, the new groom at Poloc Hall.

"You scoundrel ! I'll kill you, if you don't tell me this instant whose tool you are !" cried Poloc, madly.

"Here he is, men ! Lay hold of him, you curs !" It was the voice of Crump.

Poloc heard it, and a thrill went through him. He flung the crouching groom from him, and swung round, and stood fronting Archibald Crump.

"So you are here, are you ?"

"I am here, as you see. What right have you to be maltreating my servant, sir ?" demanded Crump, insolently.

"He is your servant, then, in this matter, is he ?"

"Certainly. It was necessary to foil your base plot, and we have foiled it. Why, man,

I have ridden in front of you there, for the last hour and a half."

"Indeed. And this is your friendship, eh? I was warned of your treachery, but——"

"Damn you! don't bandy words with me. You are a common highwayman, and robbed the Duke of——"

As Poloc sprang at him, Crump dodged, and, drawing a pistol, sent a bullet through Poloc's left arm. Just then somebody thrust a pistol into Poloc's hand, and a voice that sounded curiously like Muskerry's, whispered—

"Give the traitorous raff what he deserves!"

Poloc needed no urging. There was a flash, a loud report, and Crump fell as if dead.

"Fly!" whispered Muskerry, and Poloc fled. Ten minutes later, Crump recovered consciousness. His first words were—

“Where is he?” And when they told him that Poloc had escaped in the confusion, he exclaimed—

“Damn him ! I’ll follow him all round the earth till I have my revenge !”

Then he fell into a deep swoon.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.



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